UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Riding the Red Dragon

Representing Menstruation in High Fantasy Literature

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February 2018

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Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Institution – Department Kielten osasto	
Tekijä – Författare – Author Maria Talvela		
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title Riding the Red Dragon: Representing Menstruation in High Fantasy Literature		
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Englantilainen filologia		
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Pro gradu -tutkielma	Aika – Datum – Month and year Helmikuu 2018	Sivumäärä– Sidoantal – Number of pages 82 + 8

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielma kartoittaa kuukautisten representaatiota high fantasy -tyyppisessä fantasiakirjallisuudessa. Se osoittaa, että kuukautisten esittämistapa on kytköksissä kaksoisstandardiin naishahmojen esittämisessä: naiset esitetään miehiä kehollisempina mutta naiskeho idealisoidaan, ja maskuliinisen roolin omaksuvat naishahmot nähdään feminiinisiä naishahmoja positiivisempina. Kuukautisnarratiivien vähyys puolestaan viittaa siihen, että fantasia arvottaa miesvaltaiset narratiivit naisvaltaisia narratiiveja korkeammalle.

Lauren Rosewarnen taksonomiaa kuukautisnarratiiveista hyödyntäen tutkielma kartoittaa, millä tavoilla ja missä konteksteissa fantasiakirjallisuudessa puhutaan kuukautisista. Se ammentaa Elizabeth Groszin kehollisuustutkimuksesta ja osoittaa, että sukupuolitettu keho/mieli-dikotomia elää fantasiakirjallisuudessa vahvana.

Tutkielma pohjautuu pääasiassa yhteentoista vuosina 1983–2012 kirjoitettuun fantasiakirjaan, joita analysoidaan eri konteksteissa (kuukautisterminologia, kuukautisten alkaminen, hedelmällisyys, ennakkoluulot ja seksismi, kuukautishygienia). Lisäksi se sisältää kolme yksityiskohtaisempaa tapaustutkimusta kuukautiskohtauksista George R.R. Martinin A Song of Ice and Fire -sarjassa.

Negatiiviset kuukautisrepresentaatiot ovat kytköksissä hierarkiaan, jossa maskuliinisen roolin omaksuvat naishahmot arvotetaan korkeammalle kuin muut naishahmot. Kuukautisten esittäminen on sidoksissa naisten kehollisuuden esittämiseen sekä fantasian eskapismiin: high fantasy -tyyppisen fantasian yhteiskunnat ovat usein misogyynisiä, ja naishahmojen on tasapainoteltava mieskatseen ja maskuliinisen roolin omaksumista edellyttävän toimijuuden välimaastossa.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
kuukautiset, fantasiakirjallisuus, A Song of Ice and Fire

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited
Keskustakampuksen kirjasto

Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

This thesis explores the representation of menstruation in high fantasy literature. Its appearances are few but telling: the evasive treatment it receives reflects the discomfort surrounding women's bodies even to this day. The absence of menstruation highlights that fantasy implicitly places the male experience higher than the female experience, idealising and sanitising the female body. The elision of menstruation is connected partly to how it is seen in society at large – it carries a stigma and is not discussed – and partly to the escapist quality of fantasy.

Chapter 2 of this thesis looks at the representation of menstruation in mainly European history and literature. It also discusses how the female body is represented in literature, and explores fantasy as a patriarchal genre.

Chapter 3 focuses on menstruation tropes in fantasy. It addresses the role of terminology to deduce how menstruation is presented in fantasy fiction, and lists common contextual denominators in the fantastic depiction of menstruation, namely: menarche; sex and fertility, and by extension, losing one's virginity; sexism and superstitions; and menstrual management, particularly in the context of impersonating a man. Drawing on Lauren Rosewarne's taxonomy of menstrual portrayals in film and television (3), this thesis aims to chart the acceptability of various menstruation representations, and uses this ranking to discuss how gender is represented in high fantasy fiction.

Chapter 4 takes a more extensive look at the representation of menstruation in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*ASoIaF*) series (1996–). *ASoIaF* takes a casual approach to portraying bodily functions, and consequently menstruation makes several appearances. In addition to a general overview on the representation of menstruation and its implications in the series, not all of which are positive, there are case studies on the three scenes where menstruation is physically present: Sansa Stark's problematic menarche in *A Clash of Kings* (1999), subjected to the patriarchy; Cersei and Jaime Lannister's taboo-breaking menstrual sex scene in *A Storm of Swords* (2000); and Daenerys Targaryen's transcendental menstruation in the final chapter of *A Dance with Dragons* (2011).

This thesis aims to show that while high fantasy embraces the gendered mind (male) and body (female) dichotomy common in Euro-American philosophy, there has been a double standard in representing the female body: on the one hand, women

are presented as more corporeal and closer to nature, and on the other, the representation of their bodies is idealised to please the male gaze. This underlines that fantasy as a genre is pseudohistorical, and the ways menstruation is represented are intrinsically connected to the social atmosphere in which the writers live. However, the variety of menstruation representations discussed in this thesis also shows that this trend may be gradually changing along with public discourse on menstruation: more recent novels discuss it more casually than the older examples analysed here.

1.1 Why This Matters

> Day and night she has to think of changing her protection, watching her underwear, her sheets, and solving a thousand little practical and repugnant problems.
>
> – Simone de Beauvoir (326-27)

Half of the world's population spends a good 40 years of their life menstruating. On average, women today have 450 periods during their lifetime ("Menstruation: Fact Sheet") and consequently bleed for thousands of days. For many, the menstrual cycle includes physical or mental side effects that vary individually, such as "greater or lesser pain, sickness, and emotional or psychological disruption" (Jenkins v). Yet these thousands of days, and the potential side effects even less, are not often seen anywhere in literature, and this includes the fantasy genre.

Literature is a powerful political tool that both reflects and creates the world (Robbins 9). Representations of gender are significant; "[t]he images we see or read about are part of the context in which we live" (Robbins 51). Half of the world's population lives in the context of bleeding monthly, yet there are few images that pertain to this or show that menstruating is nothing to be ashamed of. Menstruation is a normal bodily function but still gets demonised: when it is presented in fictional narratives, it is "disruptive, … a passion-killer, and … connected to evil" (Rosewarne 86). The reasons for this demonising are rarely questioned. Lauren Rosewarne argues that the hate menstruation receives is misogyny by proxy: "Rather than simply, arbitrarily, hating women based on different chromosomes, *instead*, menstruation as a messy female bodily function is considered as the root of women's weakness, subordination, and thus, is loathed as a subtler method of misogyny" (87). Despite a recent increase in activism aiming to normalise menstruation, it is still strikingly absent from most fiction, and its few representations are often negative. Negative

portrayals directly affect how people who menstruate perceive their bodies, and since the vast majority of menstruators are women,[1] the systematic elision of menstruation from fictional narratives is a form of misogyny: an often-occurring, woman-specific event is left out because the popular narrative likes to present it as repulsive.

Representation matters, and the exclusion of menstruation has consequences. Its elision within literature and popular discourse may be harmful to adolescents, especially women, "as it negatively skews their understanding of their bodies" (Evins 34): the implicit notion that an ideal woman does not bleed enters one's mind as soon as they start consuming films and literature in which menstruation is not shown. Ideas of the taboo, stigma and secrecy of menstruation are also reinforced when menstruation is downplayed in popular narratives (Rosewarne 3), and the overall absence of public discussion strongly implies that there are reasons to feel uncomfortable about menstruation (Rosewarne 39). In short, the less, and the more negatively menstruation is discussed, the more people attach notions of shame to it. However, as Rosewarne also points out, positive and celebratory representations of menstruation mitigate the negative messages as well as enable attitude change and acceptance towards menstruation (61). While representation is not the same as reality, Robbins argues that "the analysis of literary representations of women and their differences from real women's lives might well be a fruitful place to begin a politicised analysis of that reality" (51). Whether we look at representation or real life, the menstrual reality so far looks bleak: even when menstruation is represented, attitudes towards it tend to be overwhelmingly negative. In her study on menstruation in film and television, Rosewarne believes that the deluge of negative on-screen presentations of menstruation is complicit in this (224). It is therefore hard to say whether no portrayals at all would be better than the all too common portrayals, explicit or implicit, of menstruation as evil and disgusting – but the trend is gradually changing, and menstruation is beginning to be discussed more casually and positively even in mainstream literature and television.

Some readers might argue that fantasy is unrealistic and therefore of little consequence. It portrays magic and sorcery, dragons and other imaginary beings, and worlds which do not follow the laws of (meta)physics as we know them. Fantasy is often anachronistic, and gender roles in fantasy most of all: even when writers do

[1] People who menstruate include some trans men, intersex people, and non-binary people who do not identify as female.

want to portray a more or less accurate, if fantastical, version of a real historical era, and even when they do their research, they are often thwarted by the fact that most of history has been written and interpreted by men and may thus exclude the female experience. Despite the unrealism and anachronism, it matters how fantasy deals with menstruation:

> All fantasy is political, even – perhaps especially – when it thinks it is not. From the abstruse literary confection to the sharecropped franchise series, a fantasy text at the very least functions like any cultural text to reproduce dominant ideology. (Bould and Vint 102)

Like more realistic literature, fantasy is not separate from the world in which it is written. It reflects and reproduces it, and the readers, steeped in the dominant ideologies as they are, may not think to question how fantasy tackles subjects such as gender and sexuality because they are used to seeing the same representations elsewhere. At the same time, fantasy has a lot of potential to reach out above and beyond the plane of realism. As Casey argues, "fantasy, by its very nature, challenges the dominant political and conceptual ideologies in a manner similar to that of postmodernism" (115). Fantasy has always been about exploring what is possible, and it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that it *would* be possible to portray a normal bodily function such as menstruation in a way that destigmatises it, rather than reinforces the existing stigma. Some novels discussed in this thesis indeed succeed in this.

1.2 Genre & Novel Overview

Fantasy is about the construction of the impossible (James and Mendlesohn 1). While the genre is fairly young[2] and its academic study even more so, subgenres of fantasy have been defined both by the world they are set in, or by the way in which the fantastic enters the text. The novels analysed in this thesis qualify as *high fantasy* – that is, they are set in a secondary world, rather than having supernatural intrusions into the real world (Wolfe, *Critical Terms* 52) – and *immersive fantasy* – in which the protagonists are part of the secondary, fantastic world (James and Mendlesohn 2) and "must accept the fantastic entities with which they are surrounded as aspects of their normality" (Stableford 307). The focus on immersive and high fantasy provides

[2] "'Fantasy' became firmly established as the label for a popular commercial genre of adult fiction in the 1970s" (Stableford 35-36), and academic criticism of the genre sprung up around the same time (Stableford 42-43).

us with an insight into what is portrayed as normal in the fantasy novels discussed, and the way characters react to menstruation, as well as the scarcity of portrayals, implies that menstruation is not seen as normal. However, fantasy as a genre also allows for what I will call *menstrual distancing*: the handling of the topic in a way that sets it apart from contemporary menstruation narratives and thus lessens the stigma, and there are some positive examples of that.

The trend set by J.R.R. Tolkien has led to most fantasy written in the latter part of the 20th century taking place in a setting reminiscent of medieval Europe. The early 21st century has seen a positive development towards a more culturally diverse direction: contemporary fantasy does not only tell white male stories, and all societies no longer have a distinctly European mark on them (Alter). However, this thesis focuses on fantasy that takes place in a medieval European setting: using a common denominator allows comparison between different stories' treatment of menstruation against a theoretical background of historical European menstruation discourse, while keeping in mind that fantasy, like all contemporary literature, is a product of its time and different from historical fiction in its inclusion of magical elements and imaginary settings. Thus, it is not the intention of this thesis to draw a direct comparison between medieval European views and contemporary fantasy portrayals of menstruation. When comparisons occur, they are mostly to illustrate the background of menstruation discourse, and to show that authorial choices to present menstruation negatively may not be rooted in history, but in the contemporary stigma against menstruation.

While it is by no means a given that menstruation appears in a fantasy story, its portrayals are getting more common. It is not within the scope of this thesis to address them all, nor can it make an extensive study of all menstruation-related works. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to analyse contemporary mainstream fantasy novels rather than novels with a markedly feminist approach, to provide an overview into how fantasy fiction deals with the topic of menstruation in general. These novels bring up menstruation, but it does not serve a key role in the plot. The treatment of menstruation is connected to how gender is represented: as Milon claims, female characters who adopt male roles are interpreted as largely positive, and vice versa (52), and their menstruation is consequently portrayed more positively.

1.3 Terminology

Late 20th-century feminism has traditionally used the term "sex" to describe biological differences, while "gender" covers the socio-cultural construct (Newton 49), but gender studies have since questioned this binary. For example, intersex people "have a 'sex' imposed on them … depending on their dominant sex traits," and stemming from this, many third wave feminists – particularly in Queer Theory – argue that not just gender, but also sex, is a social construct that supports and upholds our concepts about female and male bodies (Newton 50).

Throughout European history, menstruation has been viewed as quintessentially female and, despite the cursory medieval belief that some men could also menstruate (Green 60), as the main difference between women and men. However, a broader understanding of gender and sexual diversity has led feminist critics to question this view in favour of the one that not all of those who menstruate are women, and not all women menstruate. Menstruation affects people born with ovaries and a uterus, and this includes trans men and some intersex and non-binary people. Therefore, some critics argue for using the term "menstruators" in order to detach physiological sex from gender and to account for ambiguous bodies who may bleed but do not identify themselves as women, and for thus splitting off femaleness and womanhood from menstruation (Lorber xi). On the other hand, there are critics who maintain that we cannot completely omit the physical body in discussing menstruation (Newton 51): talking about body-based discrimination becomes more complicated if we do not talk about women-specific issues as such (Bobel 13), and despite a number of non-women who bleed, the menstrual stigma mainly affects women and girls.

All menstruation scenes discussed in this thesis feature a person who identifies as female. All in all, mainstream high fantasy portrays very few trans, intersex or non-binary characters. The relative lack of gender diversity in fantasy means that the question of menstruation is deeply intertwined with the depiction of female characters. Therefore, while I acknowledge that not all women bleed and not all who bleed are women, I have chosen mainly to speak about "women" and "girls" rather than "menstruators" in this thesis.

2 Painting the Town Red: Menstruation in History and Literature

2.1 A Brief History of European Menstruation

The menstrual cycle has always shaped women's lives, although not to the extent it does today: our hunter-gatherer ancestresses had only a third as many periods as women today ("Menstruation: Fact Sheet"). Menstruation was first and foremost a sign of fertility. Goddess worship in Palaeolithic Europe focused on aspects of women's fertility, and various feminine figurines that have been discovered from the era, such as the Venus of Willendorf, have originally been covered in red ochre, perhaps representing menstrual blood (Kellermeier). It is thought that the earliest lunar calendars were created by women to keep track of their periods (Grahn 156-57). However, menstruation has not been viewed as entirely positive throughout history, quite the contrary.

Earliest written records on menstruation in Europe date back to Leviticus in the Old Testament and to classical Greece and Rome (Newton 20). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, menstruation has been portrayed as overwhelmingly negative: it is the biblical curse of Eve, and the Old Testament presents the menstruating woman as unclean and impure (*King James Bible*, Leviticus 15:19-31). In Greece and Rome, written records of menstruation focused on its medical side and its role in reproduction and women's well-being – a regular period was considered the key to women's health throughout European history (Newton 21-22). Superstitions were also present: Pliny the Elder lists menstrual blood's perceived magical – and poisonous – effects, ranging from turning wine sour to, if applied properly, relieving headaches (Newton 23-24). Early medical writings defined women primarily in terms of "what man is not," and menstruation was used to construct an idea of "a female body that was inherently weak and in need of regulation" (Newton 22).

Many of the Ancient Greek and Roman notions persisted through the Middle Ages, partly thanks to Pliny (Green 58). In medieval Western Europe, menstruation was not commonly discussed but never invisible: "it was always a symbol of female difference (even if it occurred in men), [3] serving as a marker both of female fecundity and female physicality" (Green 52). Menstruation was thought to be a prerequisite for conception, "the end result of a whole bodily process on purification, one unique

[3] It was commonly believed in the Middle Ages that some men – particularly Jewish – could also menstruate. (Green 60)

to the female body" (Green 53), and there was a wide range of medical and scientific theories regarding its workings and purposes and what constituted "normal" bleeding (Green 54). There were also notions of pollution and uncleanliness, especially among Jewish women; in the Christian framework, the Pope challenged the exclusion of menstruating women from ritual practices in the late 6th century because "since menstruation was an involuntary 'infirmity', menstruating (or postpartal) women should not be excluded from church" (Green 59).

During the early modern period in Europe, the long-standing notion of the poisonous quality of menstrual blood was questioned (Newton 28) but many other superstitions persisted. Menstrual sex was to be avoided, and in some places in Britain, menstruating women were not allowed to pickle pork or salt bacon lest it spoil (Newton 28-29). Regular menstruation was still deemed important for women's health (Newton 27); this view has persisted from classical times to this day, visible today for example in the contraceptive pill arbitrarily emulating the menstrual cycle.[4]

When the struggle for women's emancipation began in the 19th and 20th century, menstruation discourse took on political overtones (Newton 32). Male writers argued that women were not suitable for higher education or work because of their menstrual cycles, yet the results of studies describing the presumed effects of menstruation on women's physical and mental capabilities were often manipulated "in order to reflect the social and economic situations of the era:" when women were needed in the workforce during the two World Wars, studies would conclude that menstruation was not a liability after all (Newton 32-33). The wars resulted in another menstruation-related contribution: after French nurses discovered that the cellulose used for bandages was more efficient in absorbing menstrual blood than cloth diapers, the first disposable sanitary napkins hit the markets in 1921, with many more menstrual products to follow (Delaney et al. 139).

In the 20th century, menstruation discourse underwent a shift from primarily a matter of fertility to a matter of hygiene, largely thanks to the growing menstrual hygiene industry that sought to make a profit by focusing on "cleanliness" (Evins 45). The veil of public silence surrounding menstruation began to lift in the 1970s and 1980s when references to periods started to occur openly in film and television,

[4] Christine Read suggests a variety of reasons for the 28-day cycle common in contraceptive pills, including "a desire to mimic the normal ovulatory cycle to facilitate general community acceptance … and concerns that not having a bleed on a monthly basis may be harmful" ("New Regimens" 33).

in both shows and commercials (Delaney et al. 151; Newton 171-72). The menstrual hygiene industry has shaped how menstruation is seen today, partly because it is often the gateway for young girls to menstrual information. Newton argues that most menstruation adverts "appeal to the insecurities that women have about their bodies, and to their need to retain control and keep their menstruation a secret" (173). This approach perpetuates the image of menstruation as something dirty and shameful, but along with other menstruation-related activism, the trend may be gradually changing.[5] In any case, when fantasy fiction addresses menstruation, it is usually in terms of hygiene, in line with the contributions of the menstrual hygiene industry to the 20th century discourse.

Euro-American researchers have been keen to assign values to menstruation both within their immediate vicinity and in other cultures, "through Western eyes and … working through a patriarchal framework" (Newton 37). It has been a popular trope in Euro-American anthropology and ethnography to view the customs surrounding menstruation – that exist to a varying degree in most cultures – as taboos that restrict the life of menstruating women, but the reality is more complicated than that. Buckley and Gottlieb point out that taboo is not the same as oppression and it often goes unrecognised that "taboos surrounding the menstrual cycle may restrict the behaviour of others more than that of the menstruating woman herself" (9), and rules against women working may just as easily provide them with a much-needed break than suppress them (14). They suggest that the "'female oppression' models of menstrual taboos, in their simpler forms at least, are inadequate," and while some cultures may have used menstruation to justify misogyny, it is tautological and unrealistic to assume that menstrual taboos indicate women's inferior status in society (14-15) – a conclusion which Euro-American researchers have favoured because it reinforces their own ideas about menstruation and women's status. When fantasy writers choose to present women in certain negative ways, arguing for "historical accuracy," they follow similar faulty logic – normalising misogyny by viewing history through contemporary eyes.

The trend of viewing menstruation as pollution was primarily set by Mary Douglas in the 1960s. Douglas identifies menstrual blood as dirt – matter out of place

[5] It is only recently that some menstrual product manufacturers have begun to break away from the trend of using an inoffensive blue liquid in lieu of red, with UK-based Bodyform releasing the first advert ever with actual blood in it, concisely titled "Blood," as late as 2016.

(36) – which transgresses by flowing outside of the body's boundaries (122). Thus, menstrual blood pollutes by not being in its proper place. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Julia Kristeva continued the idea of pollution in her research, distinguishing between "polluting fluids," such as excrement and menstrual blood, and "non-polluting fluids," such as tears and, semen[6] (71). According to Kristeva, what gives menstrual blood its abject quality is "the danger issuing from within the identity (…); it threatens the relationship between the sexes" (71). It should be noted that people do tend to avoid menstrual blood: linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge carried out a research on repulsion and found out that menstrual blood was identified as the third-most disgusting substance, only preceded by faeces and vomit (qtd. in Rosewarne 113) – but it is unclear whether the main cause for disgust is the blood or the negative social notions attached to menstruation. Douglas and Kristeva have often been quoted in discussions on menstruation. However, as this thesis does not focus on menstrual blood but on the social representation of menstruation at large, working on the assumption that it is inherently connected to the representation of women, the theories of Douglas and Kristeva will not be applied further.

Menstruation discourse has become more mainstream in the beginning of the 21st century with the rise of the period positivity movement. The very fact that fictional representations of menstruation are becoming more common is a testament to the impact of feminism which "[takes] traditionally private matters and [moves] them into the public sphere" (Rosewarne 171). Even so, it is still a highly stigmatised topic, not widely addressed in fictional narratives and a source of discomfort to audiences. Rosewarne argues that the scarcity of menstruation portrayals is what makes people uncomfortable: "such presentations are considered in bad taste because they are seldom seen and have not yet been mainstreamed or normalized" (205). We now look at the representation of the female body in literature and its interaction with the representation of menstruation.

2.2 Appropriating the Female Body in Literature

Literature and media portrayals reinforce the idea of what constitutes normal. This is evident when discussing women's bodies: people compare themselves to what they

[6] Elizabeth Grosz criticises Kristeva for claiming menstrual blood as an abject yet excluding semen, asking if paternity is "less threatening, less dangerous, less vulnerable" (207) than maternity, or rather, if it is only so for men. She concludes that the grounds of Kristeva's analysis "remain obscure and not entirely convincing" (207).

see, be it heavily photoshopped models in advertisements or fictional characters who do not menstruate. According to A.L. Evins, "[l]iterature is one of many cultural sites in which our conception of the body is actively constructed, and contemporary literature taps into the conversation as it unfolds, rendering it a unique locus of commentary" (2). The inclusion or elision of a particular topic is relevant, and how menstruation is discussed in literature matters.

While the literary elision of menstruation concerns people of all ages who bleed, it may be particularly harmful to adolescents. As Newton points out, "observation, informal communication, and the societal pressures and stereotypes expressed in a formal education and the mass media," along with the fear of being exposed, shape the attitudes of adolescent girls towards their periods (71). Strangely enough, young adult literature is no less devoid of representations of menstruation than mainstream literature, attracting criticism from Evins who admonishes it for rejecting its potential to support young women on the cusp of menarche, and choosing instead to project and perpetuate cultural values that present menstruation as shameful (47-48). One may ask whether literature, or any genre thereof, can be held accountable for not choosing to include didactic undertones that aim at normalising menstruation, and perhaps the answer is no. It is, however, unquestionable that literature has a significant role in constructing and deconstructing what we as a culture find normal (Robbins 9). Moreover, young adult literature – among which fantasy is a large subgenre – often contains a certain degree of didacticism. How young adult literature presents the female body affects how adolescent readers see their bodies, or the bodies of their peers.

While literature often avoids mentioning bodily fluids, blood, along with tears, tends to be an exception. However, no matter how much blood flows in a work of fiction, menstrual blood is strikingly absent. Grosz suggests that bodily fluids "betray a certain irreducible materiality; they assert the priority of the body over subjectivity; they demonstrate the limits of subjectivity in the body, the irreducible specificity of particular bodies" (194). This implies that there are right and wrong ways to shed blood: a person, or a fictional character, is hardly responsible for bleeding from a wound inflicted on them, for a wound comes from the outside. Blood that comes from the inside instead is perceived as a problem and as evidence of women's inferiority. Grosz argues that the West has constructed the female body not only as lacking the phallus, but lacking self-containment: the female body is seen

as “a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid: as formless flow: as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; … not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order” (203). This description may explain the perceived difference between menstrual and other kinds of blood; in short, the female body is uncontrollable and leaking. Fluids are implicitly associated “with femininity, with maternity, with the corporeal, all elements subordinated to the privilege of the self-identical, the one, the unified, the solid” (Grosz 195). The aversion to them is a reaction to the “horror of femininity, the voraciousness and indeterminacy of the *vagina dentata*” (Grosz 194), the toothed vagina, which is “perhaps the most well known of men’s fears about the vagina: that the vagina is a frightful place … where bad things like castration can occur” (Rosewarne 105).

The perceived polluting quality of menstrual blood is connected to bloodletting traditions. Since bloodletting – hunting, ritual sacrifice, etc. – is an almost exclusively male business in most cultures of the world, it is possible to see menstrual blood – blood that flows of its own volition and without male interference – as “out of place” and a pollutant (Buckley and Gottlieb 27). It is interesting to note, however, that men’s bodily fluids have always been viewed very differently from women’s. In her essay on British medical practices in the 19th and early 20th century, Julie-Marie Strange points out that “male sexual emissions were healthy and fundamental to sustaining masculine vitality” while “female sexual processes were overwhelmingly discussed in negative language that fostered associations between illness and the female reproductive organs” (105). Kristeva echoes this view in describing menstrual blood as a pollutant while semen is apparently not (71). It presents an interesting contrast with the view that a regular menstruation was the key to women’s wellbeing (Newton 21-22), and the idea that women’s bodily processes are both necessary to them and an illness reinforces the notion that women’s bodies are inherently inferior to male bodies. Grosz points out that while there is a huge amount of (theoretical) literature on women’s bodies, there is next to nothing on men’s bodily fluids (198), and suggests that the focus on women’s bodily fluids at the expense of men’s is part of a patriarchal attempt to distance masculinity from corporeality and its feminine implications (200). It is part of the mind and body dichotomy continuum where the mind is seen as inherently masculine and the body as feminine.

In choosing what to portray, writers consciously or unconsciously assign values to things. It is usually the male experience that is placed on a literary pedestal, while the female experience often gets devalued and downplayed (Delaney et al. 171). The elision of menstruation is a direct consequence of this trend. Euro-American philosophy has cherished the mind and body dichotomy through the centuries, associating the mind and rationality with all things male, and the body and corporeality with femaleness (Grosz 4). Elizabeth Grosz argues that dichotomous thinking leads necessarily to a hierarchy between these two, rendering privilege to the mind and assigning the body to be its negative counterpart (3) or, in de Beauvoir's terms, its Other (6). Literature, as well as the world at large, tends to favour the mind over the body, and this "central tension between the mind and the body that ripples throughout all levels of our society: the privileging of the intellect over the perceived base, animalistic nature of the body" (Evins 60) is a major contributor to why menstruation portrayals are often so strikingly absent from literature. Despite public discourse around menstruation opening in recent years, Newton argues that the menstruating woman is still "hidden" even in contemporary Western society (183), and authorial choices to downplay menstruation reflect this. As Evins puts it, "[b]loodless literature mimics not a bloodless world, but a bloodless culture, a culture determined to deny a basic bodily reality" (48). The stigma surrounding menstruation – a bodily emission, not controlled by the mind – is still strong enough to keep a quintessential part of the female experience away from publication.

Moreover, literature has traditionally tackled male interests because, as Grosz argues, "[i]t is only men who can afford the belief that their perspective is an outside, disinterested, or objective position" (191). Hence male writers have been able to dictate what constitutes "serious" literature, and to "define reality": as Delaney et al. argue, "[c]onfrontation with a white whale, though unlikely, is at least a possible experience for males" while menstruation is not[7] and is therefore often dismissed (181). Meanwhile women's stories "are not viewed as serious enough or canonical enough to be held in high esteem" (Rosewarne 207). Delaney et al. point out that unique female experiences, such as childbirth or menstruation, are absent in most of literature, and even when they are represented, it is usually from a male's point of

[7] This refers to cis males; some trans men may menstruate.

view (171). These experiences, and especially menstruation, have been left out of popular narratives because male writers have not considered them "an essential forming experience in the human condition" (Delaney et al. XI). Human is in this case often used synonymously with man, while women are something else entirely: the Other, an enigma. The choice to portray the female body in fiction as a non-bleeding and sterile entity continues to trivialise the female experience.

One possible reason for the dearth of menstruation portrayals is the fact that it is still all too easy for men to perceive women and their bodies as both enigmatic and inconsequential. Popular culture does little to demystify the female body or menstruation: on the contrary, the less the average man knows of perceivedly female matters, the more masculine he generally appears (Rosewarne 27). Similarly, the lack of respect that the female experience enjoys is clearly visible, for example in that chick lit is considered trivial, telling a specifically *female* story rather than a universal human one. Also, literary representations of women, whether written by a man or a woman, do not necessarily echo reality: the absence of menstruation portrayals may stem from the notion that the ideal woman does not bleed. This grossly appropriates the female body, denying it its reproductive functions to please the (male) reader.

Euro-American views on femininity are often self-contradictory and demanding. There is an obvious link between menstruation and femininity, yet the two ideas clash. While menstruation is an overwhelmingly female matter, with nearly every woman menstruating and nearly every menstruator being a woman, many of the effects associated with it (for example uncleanliness and smell) "are often considered incongruent with femininity" (Rosewarne 186-87). As Newton points out, women must produce their bodies but also repress the female body (54): in appearing feminine, women must hide their biologically fundamental bodily functions. Downplaying and hiding menstruation is thus an essential part of performing femininity.

Many people are inclined to rationalise the elision of menstruation from literature by comparing it to the relative lack of bathroom scenes. Newton distinguishes between women's public and private spheres, suggesting that the division may explain why menstruation is not discussed. She argues that "backstage preparations" are kept private, and to her this includes toilet habits, menstruation, and sex (96). While this may apply in real life, fantasy, as well as a lot of mainstream

literature, often steers well away from the former two but is keen to portray sex. People who see menstruation primarily as a hygiene issue would perhaps be inclined to use the pairing of toilet habits and menstruation as an excuse for the elision of menstruation: most writers follow an unspoken agreement tacitly to pass by their character's toilet visits. However, to many people who bleed, menstruation means significantly more than a few daily minutes spent squatting. It may include a variety of side effects, from mild bloating to debilitating pain and even mental symptoms, not to mention having to plan ahead to make sure one has access to menstrual products and pain relief in case one's uterus decides to shed its lining two weeks early. Thus, the tendency to shrug off the elision of menstruation from literature on the mere basis that also urination and defecation are rarely depicted is insufficient.

Lauren Rosewarne concludes her study *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (2012) by offering several possible explanations for the lack of menstruation portrayals in film and television. She speculates that for one, menstruation may not actually be such a significant event for many women that they would feel the urge to talk or even complain about it; and for another, while menstruation *may* be dismissed as a sanitary event, women have also been conditioned to hide and downplay it so as not to appear weaker or less capable than men (204). Both explanations work better for film and television than for literature: when a story has a first-person female narrator, it seems unlikely that she would coyly censor her period – which may include for example cramps, nausea, or fatigue – while being open about everything else. It is reasonable to suggest that it is an authorial decision, conscious or unconscious, rather than plot reasons, that dictate whether menstruation is mentioned. Rosewarne's third suggestion for the absence of menstruation portrayals is the notion that the "ideal" woman does not menstruate, and the reader or watcher would prefer not to be reminded of women's "pollution" (206). This seems likely also in fiction. Rosewarne also speculates that including menstruation may only serve as a distraction: it can "deliver a narrative with more sexual politics than might be desirable," or "[h]aving a character participate in something widely considered taboo … can distract an audience … and thus potentially derail a narrative" (210). This may be true in some cases, but much of it depends on the portrayal: as discussed in chapter 4.3, even incestuous menstrual sex in a house of worship may not derail the narrative if it is presented matter-of-factly.

Rosewarne identifies a number of different menstruation portrayals common in popular culture: “those associated with the gendered nature of place and space; as a rite of passage; as something disrupting life; as disgusting; as connected to sexuality; as empowering, and as absent” (3), and points out that when menstruation is, in fact, included in a narrative, it is rarely the regular non-event that real-life menstruation tends to be. Instead it is treated as drama – and negative at that – that needs to justify its presence: “It is traumatic, embarrassing, distressing, offensive, comedic, or thoroughly catastrophic: that is, it is portrayed in a high-drama fashion that justifies its inclusion in a screen narrative” (Rosewarne 224). This point also applies in literature; mainstream fantasy fiction does not tend to elaborate on every little detail of its characters’ lives, and therefore menstruation is mainly brought up in very specific cases, echoing Rosewarne’s listing. However, as Robbins points out, the ideal images of femininity are not a fixed entity, but have changed through differing social and historical circumstances and can change again: “perhaps this time through the agency of female subjects reclaiming their images for themselves” (66). Recent menstrual activism has brought the stigma to public awareness.

Literature reinforces ideas of what is normal (Evins 2). Thus, the elision of menstruation is harmful, not the least because it influences how young women see their bodies. The absence of menstruation narratives is connected to old ideas about the enigma of the female body: it leaks and lacks self-containment, and fluids are a symbol of uncomfortable femininity (Grosz 203). Euro-American thinking tends to dichotomise the mind and the body, placing more value on the mind and rationality which are traditionally associated with male (Grosz 4). Similarly, literature focuses on the male experience: women’s stories are women’s stories, not relevant and not a universal forming experience (Delaney et al. 171). The view that an ideal female body does not bleed appropriates women’s experience, subjecting it to what the universal male reader finds comfortable. This is why menstruation must justify its presence in a narrative (Rosewarne 224).

2.3 Fantasy and Science Fiction as Patriarchal Genres

Most major fantasy theorists agree that fantasy is “about the construction of the impossible,” unlike science fiction which “may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible” (James and Mendlesohn 1). However, what “impossible” means is often limited and very much tied to the cultural framework in

which the stories were produced: while fantasy may imagine elves and dwarfs into existence, it is not uncommon that these imaginary beings are exclusively white-skinned, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Another impossible thing that fantasy literature likes to construct is female bodies that – with a few exceptions – do not appear to menstruate.

The roots of fantasy lie in 18th and 19th century "private histories," the Gothic romance, and folk and fairy tales (Wolfe, "Fantasy" 12), but for a long time, fantasy and science fiction walked hand in hand, with science fiction as the more popular genre. Despite being arguably invented by a teenage girl,[8] science fiction was both written and purchased almost exclusively by men until the end of the 1950s (Roberts, *SF* 72), when fantasy also entered the public consciousness along with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis's works. The gender balance became gradually more even as fantasy branched out from science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in many ways Tolkien and Lewis set the trend for what kind of fantasy is still written. One of Tolkien's largest, if unintentional, contributions made the European Middle Ages "the default cultural model for the fantasy world" (James 70). This setting continues to affect fantasy literature even today despite many non-Western writers and writers of colour successfully broadening the field in recent years to create a variety of more diverse fantasy worlds.

Sexism is one of the consequences of the medieval European setting – or rather, the consequence of how contemporary audiences interpret medieval gender roles. Because fantasy is set in a (fictional) historic past, "misogyny is often not questioned because 'that's just how things were back then'" (Milon 39). George R.R. Martin states that *A Song of Ice and Fire* reflects "a patriarchal society based on the Middle Ages" and goes on to imply that in order not to be accused of sexism, one ought to portray an egalitarian society – which is "not in our history; it's something for science fiction" (Hibberd), as if there were no shades of grey. However, gender roles may not have been as simple in the Middle Ages as fantasy makes them seem: according to medievalist Gillian Polack, speaking on the "Gender and 'Realistic History'" panel at Worldcon 75, women were equal to men in everyday life in medieval England; and as Årnfelt pointed out, there is evidence of women in a

[8] Mary Shelley was only 18 when she started writing Frankenstein. Eventually published in 1818, it can be viewed as the first science fiction novel, and its influence on 19th and 20th century culture is significant (Roberts, "Gothic" 31).

variety of jobs, including barber and locksmith – which are rarely seen in mainstream fantasy. Milon argues that gender roles "are one of the aspects anchoring fantasy in the familiar and the 'real'" (39), and the exclusion of menstruation from so much contemporary fantasy is directly linked to how we see menstruation today.

By the late 1970s many fantasy readers were female, and while it seems accepted that fantasy has provided a venue for female writers to work out ideas about feminism (James 75), the genre has also continued to cater to male interests. Even though fantasy heroines have become more common, mainstream fantasy and science fiction often focus on the male experience. As Ursula K. Le Guin points out, in the Western world "heroism has been gendered" as male, the tradition not allowing for female heroines (*Earthsea* 5). Milon suggests that because of the general submissiveness of female roles, heroines must adopt male roles to have agency (47), and subsequently male-coded heroines are interpreted by the readers more positively than characters in traditional female roles (52). As with more mainstream literature, it is the male – or male-coded – experience that merits standard depiction. This is evident in the portrayal of blood which is often present in fantasy through violence, a specifically male-coded form of bleeding. As Evins argues regarding *The Hunger Games* (2008), "one form of bloodshed remains notably absent from the bloodbath – menstruation" (4). This is connected to the underlying structure that presents male narratives as worthier, but also to the appropriation of the female body. It is more important for a fantasy heroine to be attractive than to illustrate the female experience.

By its very nature, "fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory" (Le Guin, *Language* 204).[9] According to Rosewarne, film and television exist to provide "escapism to a world where the less than desirable aspects of reality are unnecessary to the plot", granting audiences an "ideal" world without periods (217-18). The way female bodies are portrayed in fantasy can also be read as a form of escapism: it denies women their basic bodily functions and focuses on what is considered attractive. However, escaping from a mundane 9–5 job is not the same as escaping from one's bodily functions. The elision of menstruation is directly connected to the double standard in which female characters are presented: they are viewed through the male gaze as attractive bodies, yet they are denied their own corporeality.

[9] This quote is often misattributed to J.R.R. Tolkien; for a full discussion, see Aubron-Bülles.

Women's bodies, and especially their sexuality and reproductive functions, have often been used to justify misogyny. Grosz suggests that misogynist thought constructs the female body as "frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control" (13). It could be argued that eliminating menstruation from fictional representations of women, and thus reducing women's corporeal specificity which is used to justify their unequal social position (Grosz 14), lessens women's perceived vulnerability and removes these justifications for misogyny, giving women more – arbitrary – control over their bodies. Rosewarne suggests that focusing on menstruation might cause that "women become viewed as fundamentally different from men, weaker than men, *less than men*" (208). Bodies which do not leak and are not explicitly prone to perceived hormonal irregularities may perhaps be more easily presented in patriarchal fiction as equal to the male norm. This may also support the "liberal feminist objective of presenting women as more *similar* rather than more *different* to men" (Rosewarne 208). Still, these fictional representations come at the expense of people who menstruate in real life, perpetuating the stigma and conveying the impression that there is something wrong with bodies that bleed.

While it is fair to criticise fantasy for failing to portray realistic female bodies, it is not only men who are guilty of it. As Robbins writes, "[k]nowing that there is something wrong with an image does not necessarily mean that we are not attracted to it, not tempted by it" (68). According to a survey carried out by the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, 40% of women would choose never to have a period at all if given the choice, and only 8% of women enjoy their period in some ways ("Menstruation: Full Report"). The reason for the absence of menstruation may be the cultural context that frowns upon depicting periods, or it may be that women also like to imagine a reality where they do not have to bleed. A world without a messy, monthly nuisance would surely be tempting to many people who experience menstruation. However, women are also conditioned to trivialise menstruation: Rosewarne suspects that even if women do not consider their periods trivial, they understand that it is socially expected to do so and act accordingly (204). The perceived triviality, along with Milon's claim that women characters in fantasy fiction are "guided towards adopting male roles as a means of having agency" (47), contributes to the scarcity of fictional representations of menstruation.

Men tend to attribute "a greater negativity to the menstrual cycle than the women actually experiencing menstruation" (Newton 57). Given this, it is interesting that there does not seem to be a vast difference between the number of female and male fantasy writers who include menstruation in their stories. An overview of the books discussed in this thesis suggests that female writers are more likely to discuss menstruation, especially in a positive light; when written by a man, it is more likely to be presented as something dramatic. However, there is also a large number of female writers whose female characters do not appear to menstruate at all or get their period once and never have it mentioned again, and positive menstruation portrayals written by men.

In conclusion, high fantasy follows cultural norms in what it discusses. Despite becoming more inclusive over the years, the genre continues to cater to male interests and primarily portray the male experience. Partly thanks to how contemporary readers perceive historical gender roles, fantasy often portrays misogynistic societies (Milon 39) where heroism is gendered male (Le Guin, *Earthsea* 5). Female bodies are often objectified, and while other forms of bloodshed are usually present, menstruation is not (Evins 4). Women writers may mention menstruation slightly more often and less dramatically than men, but both are guilty of not portraying it. The absence of menstruation in a female character may reduce women's corporeal specificity (Grosz 14) and thus misogyny directed at menstruation (Rosewarne 208), but in doing so it fails to normalise menstruation and perpetuates the stigma. The lack of menstruation in fantasy seems to have two main causes: firstly, the cultural imperative to trivialise the female experience; and secondly, the escapist function of fantasy. The two intersect in their need to present an idealised version of the female body.

3 Overview on Menstruation Tropes in Fantasy

3.1 Taboo and Terminology

When fantasy literature discusses menstruation, it does not discuss *menstruation* or *menstrual periods*. As Victoria Louise Newton writes, menstruation is seen as "something unmentionable" which "is difficult to talk about freely and openly in our everyday lives" (134). The contemporary stigma covers the words generally used for it, and the baggage attached to terms such as *period* explains why so many fantasy

writers choose to steer away from contemporary terms and coin their own (or use old) euphemisms instead – which also happens in the real world, as seen in vernacular expressions such as "to have the painters in" and "riding the red dragon"[10] (Newton 136). Seeing on paper, in a medieval fantasy book, words that we are not used to seeing even in the menstrual hygiene aisle in the supermarket (as "feminine hygiene" seems to be the term of choice in the few cases that menstrual products are mentioned in the first place) would not only feel strange to the reader, but anachronistic. It would take them back to the decidedly non-medieval and non-fantastic secondary school health classes, and remind them of a bodily function that they would presumably rather not think about. Thus, fantasy often resorts to what can be called *menstrual distancing*: finding ways around the stigma.

The word "menstruation" is derived from the Latin *menstrua* ('monthly, monthlies') (S. Read 27), and the word "period" has been in use as early as the 1640s (S. Read 31). Using these expressions would hardly be any more anachronistic than using other old or Latin-based terms: after all, most English-language words pertaining to the human anatomy are derived from Latin. Fantasy novels are happy to discuss femurs, abdomens, and even faeces and effluvia, but even where the physical act of menstruation is represented, the word "menstruation" is strikingly absent. It is unlikely that fantasy writers avoid this word from a purely anachronistic point of view: the stigma ascribed to menstruation stops writers short of using it. In "The languages of the fantastic," Greer Gilman writes: "To name an eye, a flame, a flower on the page is to summon, not the thing itself, but its *imago*: in the oldest senses of that word, its ghost, shade, effigy. Its fetch" (135). Thanks to the cultural imperative to keep menstruation hidden, writers probably do not *want* to summon the image of menstruation as we know it, and choose to use more "neutral" expressions instead. When the expressions are not steeped in the stigma surrounding menstruation in Euro-American culture, it creates a distancing effect.

The choice of word carries significance: menstruation vocabulary is limited in cultures where it carries a great taboo, and vice versa (Newton 134). This seems to correspond with the treatment menstruation receives in fantasy fiction. Even when menstruation is discussed, it may only be mentioned by name once, and the names are often distant and clinical. In the few cases where it is brought up more times,

[10] Newton carried out a survey on vernacular expressions for menstruation in north Derbyshire, in 2007-2008.

there is often only one term for it throughout the book or series. Still, euphemisms allow us to address unconventional subjects with less of a burden than mentioning the unmentionable. In an act of menstrual distancing, the writer is free to make up a new, less stigma-infused word, and the choice of the word gives us an insight into how menstruation is viewed in the particular fantasy world. The expressions also help put a distance between the reader and the topic that they will potentially find uncomfortable. Thus, using euphemisms, even if they evoke a straightforward image of blood trickling down a menstruating character's leg, may allow the reader to overcome their aversion to the menstrual stigma.

In the young adult fantasy novel *Throne of Glass* (2012), the 18-year-old protagonist Celaena starts menstruating again after a year's break, caused by malnutrition and hard physical labour. While author Sarah J. Maas goes above and beyond – on fantasy literature standards – to describe how Celaena's body feels, menstruation is only spoken of as her "monthly cycles" (254) and later, by her male friend and love interest Prince Dorian, as her "'condition'" (quotation marks original), casting subtle irony on Celaena's other male friend and love interest Chaol who finds the topic of her menstruation uncomfortable (256). Her older female servant also mentions "monthly pains" (Maas 254) in reference to her painful cramps – another thing rarely mentioned in literature – and the fact that she uses more extensive vocabulary implies that, like in the real world (Newton 183), menstruation is more easily discussed in all-female company.

Menstruation certainly bears a stigma in *Throne of Glass*'s society at large, particularly for men. When Celaena's male friends use the word "'condition'" (Maas 256), it adds yet another layer of euphemism between menstruation and the characters, mirroring real differences in the use of menstrual expressions between women and men (Newton 138). Not only does the euphemism allow men to talk indirectly about what is more commonly known as the "monthly cycle," but it also medicalises menstruation to something woman-specific and deviant – a health problem. This is not unprecedented: terms such as "monthly sickness," "women's sickness" and "unwell" have been ascribed to menstruation for centuries (S. Read 24). Given the medicalising tone, it is hardly surprising that Celaena feels very uncomfortable when she must admit to Chaol that she is menstruating:

> "Come on. Let's get you into bed." (…)
> "I'm not ill like that," she groaned. (…)

> "Then in what way?"
> "I, uh..." Her face was so hot she thought it would melt onto the floor. *Oh, you idiot!*
> "My monthly cycles finally came back." (Maas 255-56)

It is noteworthy, however, that the two male friends who visit Celaena while she is curled up in a blanket with painful cramps and nausea, react very differently to her plight. Chaol takes his leave immediately upon learning that Celaena is having her period. Dorian, on the other hand, knows about it before arriving in her rooms. He does not share Chaol's concerns, and instead the reader can detect a certain irony when he tells Celaena: "I intercepted Chaol, and he informed me of your 'condition.' You'd think a man in his position wouldn't be so squeamish, especially after examining all those corpses" (Maas 256). Dorian decides to keep Celaena company and entertain her despite her repeated attempts to make him leave, eventually succeeding in cheering her up (Maas 257). While the scene might prompt discussion about consent, it seems to play more into the interpersonal dynamics in the novel, namely, characters expressing romantic interest towards each other by acting obnoxiously. And while it is made clear that Dorian is acting in a transgressive manner, as befits a prince, it is refreshing to come across a male character who is at ease with menstruation, so much so that he intentionally ignores the stigma to spend time with Celaena, and even admits to finding her attractive (Maas 259) at the time of the month when women are generally perceived to be very self-conscious about their appearance (Rosewarne 206).

To go by Rosewarne's listing, Celaena's menstruation is mostly "something disrupting life" but also accounts for the "gendered nature of place and space" (3), as seen in the different reactions it garners from men and women. Celaena's main concern is training for the upcoming duel which is four weeks away (Maas 254) – at the time of which she should be menstruating again. However, if Celaena's period hinders her, we do not know of it. Her period is not brought up again in the book, and if she is in fact menstruating during the duel, there is no sign of it.

In her research into menstrual euphemisms, Newton found out that women were more likely than men to use "cyclic" terms about menstruation, "the cyclic experience of menstruation being a commonplace to women" (136). The cyclical theme continues in *Alanna: The First Adventure* (1983) by Tamora Pierce. When Alanna, the teenage protagonist, starts menstruating and panics, a healing woman asks her: "Did no one ever tell you of a woman's monthly cycle? The fertility

cycle?" (Pierce 173). Here the fertility aspect of menstruation is emphasised, and the healer warns Alanna about pregnancy and gives her a charmed contraceptive necklace (Pierce 179).

What is strange about the terms discussed in *Throne of Glass* and *Alanna* – monthly cycle, fertility cycle, woman's cycle – is that they seem very sober and clinical. Few women in Euro-American culture would choose to say, "I am menstruating" instead of opting for the more colloquial "I'm on my period" or "It's that time of the month",[11] yet that is the kind of image the terms convey. In the process of rendering menstruation an acceptable topic for discussion, the writers have made it come across as sterile and distant. One possible explanation for this is that in the scenes discussed above, the menstruator is not entirely comfortable with her menstruation: in *Throne of Glass*, she is in pain and is pressured to admit her ailment to a man; while in *Alanna*, she is newly menarcheal, angry and scared, and her period is explained to her first and foremost in a medical context. However, this explanation does not fully work because it is not only in conversation that these terms are used – in all cases, the girls employ the same neutral words when *thinking* about their menstruation, making their relationship to their periods appear very distant. The distance clearly helps to circumvent the stigma when introducing a controversial topic – especially as both *Throne of Glass* and *Alanna* are young adult literature. However, it is by no means the only way.

Robin Hobb's *The Liveship Traders* trilogy (1998–2000) introduces blood into the mix. It also moves away from the tendency discussed above of only using one word for menstruation: there are at least three. Women speak of "blood days" (Hobb, *Magic* 500) or "blood time" (Hobb, *Destiny* 276), while the few times a man talks about menstruation, he repeatedly chooses the word "bleed" (Hobb, *Magic* 260, 501), often preceded by a pause or "um" to mark discomfort. While the novels discussed earlier in this chapter do not disclose any explicit prejudices regarding menstruation, the *Liveship Traders* books do so, discussed later in this thesis. Despite this, the fact that there is a pool of terms to choose from when talking about menstruation makes the culture seem more accepting of it than those where only one term exists. The fact that the words used are more descriptive also contributes to this reading: clearly menstrual blood is not so much of a taboo that it need be hidden

[11] In Newton's study, 'period' (54.1 %) and 'time of the month' (39.1 %) were the most frequent terms given by females, while just 13.9% gave 'menstruation' (135).

behind medical terminology. Another Robin Hobb novel *Fool's Fate* (2003) even shows us a culture that celebrates menstruation and menarche, although the only terms that we learn are in ceremonial phrases, such as "It is my time to show myself as a blooded woman before my clan" and "I have shed my first woman's blood" (214). This approach is very straightforward, focusing on the core elements of menstruation; but then, it is a matriarchy, with family communities presided over by women.

George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996–) takes menstruation terminology even further. The series introduces two more elements traditionally associated with menstruation: the moon and flowers. Menstruation is most commonly spoken of as the "moon blood" (Martin, *Storm* 38) or "moon's blood" (Martin, *Storm* 158), and menarche is called "flowering" (Martin, *Game* 7470). Both terms have their roots in medieval terminology for menstruation. "Her flowers" (along with "her issue") was a very common colloquial expression – with mostly positive connotations – in England since at least the 13th century (Green 51), also used in the Bible (Delaney et al. 190), and its French equivalent *les fleurs* is still being used (Delaney et al. 116); while the connection to the moon is age-old and obvious, not the least because the timing of menstruation usually follows the lunar calendar, and also because it is a recurring element in menstrual terminology.[12] In *ASoIaF,* menstruation is discussed often and with a sense of naturalness absent in most other books discussed in this thesis, and also with a degree of variation in terminology: "flowering" easily accommodates phrases such as "Is your red flower still blooming?" (Martin, *Clash* 818). While these terms subtly accentuate the physical aspects of menstruation, they are also distancing: having little to no connection to contemporary menstruation terminology, they help the reader to overcome their discomfort. The range of expressions also suggests that menstruation is deemed natural and is a topic for everyday discourse.

In conclusion, when menstruation is discussed in fantasy fiction, it is never referred to by contemporary terms. Some themes recur: it is often some kind of a "cycle," or focuses on the blood aspect ("blood time," "bleeding," "moon blood"). Sometimes natural elements are also present ("moon blood," "red flower"). The decision to avoid common contemporary terms most likely stems from a perceived

[12] "Menstruation" is derived from the Latin menstruus ("of or pertaining to a month, monthly"), and mensis ("month") has its root in Proto-Indo-European *mḗh₁n̥s ("moon, month"). ("Mensis")

sense of anachronism, but the absence of the terms that we as a society are conditioned to find embarrassing also contributes to the destigmatising of menstruation, at least within a particular text. The coinage of new terms creates an effect of menstrual distancing where the reader is re-estranged to the contemporary stigma, allowing them to view it from a more neutral perspective. However, some terms do little more than let us overcome the notions the word "menstruation" brings: a sterile, medical approach may perpetuate the image of menstruation as something that makes the female body inferior.

3.2 Menarche is Magic

Fictional menstruation portrayals overwhelmingly focus on menarche (Rosewarne 124), and the same trend is present in fantasy fiction. Of the six novels discussed in this thesis, besides *A Song of Ice and Fire* which provides several instances of menstruation, three only depict menarche rather than later menstruation. Rosewarne suggests this is probably because menstruation is only interesting the first time it happens: "[h]orror, surprise, elation, confusion are emotions that can only be felt the *first* time a girl bleeds, thus for narrative purposes, only a first period can exploit these ideas," and speculates that another explanation is "the *voyeuristic* connotations related to the sexual development of young girls" (124). There are echoes of both in the novels discussed here, namely in *Alanna: The First Adventure* (1983) and *Polgara the Sorceress* (1997). In some cases, the beginning of menstruation is also significant in that it wakens magical powers that are not always benevolent. The most famous example of this is the eponymous protagonist of Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) who develops telekinetic powers in the ultimate period-shaming narrative, but it also happens in *Polgara the Sorceress*.

Many newly menstruating characters in fantasy literature are angry or scared about their periods, and sometimes their reactions seem out of proportion, such as when Sansa Stark burns her mattress in *A Clash of Kings* (1999), discussed in chapter 4.2. Rosewarne argues that this anger may be grounded in being blindsided, that is, "being caught without sufficient education, preparation or supplies" (49). She suggests that these knowledge gaps may be one explanation for the perceived connection between menstruation and evil present in many narratives, in that "something that is not understood is construed as bad if not popularly demonized" (Rosewarne 86). It seems to be a popular trope in fantasy to introduce menstruation

to a girl protagonist's life in a sudden, shocking way, without her having a clue about what is going on. In young adult fantasy this may serve as a basis for informing the newly or soon-to-be menstruating reader, but even if the purpose is mostly informative, the menarcheal fantasy protagonists are often shocked or angry, rendering the portrayal ultimately negative. There is also a difference in how women's and men's reactions are portrayed: when girls overreact, it is often to display their naiveté, while men's overreactions to menstruation contribute to their portrayal as ignorant of feminine matters (Rosewarne 50).

Interestingly, all the menarche scenes analysed in this thesis take place in the morning, menstruation having started overnight. Waking up helpless in bloody sheets seems to be a common menarche narrative trope in fantasy, although it goes without saying that menstruation can, in fact, start at any time, day or night. The timing of menarche can be interpreted as symbolic: everything has changed overnight, and a girl wakes up to a new era of womanhood. But it also contributes to the idea discussed in the previous paragraph of menarche being sudden and shocking. Delaney et al. argue that women writers tend to depict menarche as less cataclysmic than men do, treating it instead in a more versatile manner "as a source of shame, knowledge, failure, surprise, conflict, and achievement" (182). While this may be true, most menarche scenes analysed here certainly contain a degree of cataclysmic elements regardless of the writer's gender. On the other hand, Rosewarne points out that popular culture often portrays menarche as anticlimactic (55). It is possible to see a shift in the literary treatment of menstruation and menarche within the last couple of decades: the older the novel, the more cataclysmic its portrayal of menstruation. *Alanna: The First Adventure* (1983) and *Polgara the Sorceress* (1997) take a very different approach compared to *Fool's Fate* (2003) and *Throne of Glass* (2012).

Alanna's first period in Tamora Pierce's *Alanna: The First Adventure* (1983) manages to pack together almost all the points on Rosewarne's list (3): it reminds Alanna of the gendered nature of place and space because she is pretending to be a boy; it is a rite of passage; it is presented as disgusting, thanks to Alanna's strong aversion to not being able to control her body; and the healing woman connects it to sexuality and notifies her that pregnancy will result in its absence. The only point missing is empowerment: while the healing woman treats menstruation as a normal event, there is nothing particularly positive about the scene.

Menarche is a negative experience for Alanna. She has been successfully passing as a boy and training to be a knight, and nobody back home ever seems to have told her that menstruation will be part of her life, effectively blindsiding her. As a result, when she wakes up "to find her things and sheets smeared with blood" she feels "horror" and "panic" (Pierce 168). Even though the book later addresses menstruation and menstrual management through the healing woman, the text dances coyly around the physical fact of Alanna's menstruation: the blood comes "from a secret place between her legs" (Pierce 168), the unnaming of which "mark[s] her sex as an uneasy reality within the text" (Evins 54); and she frantically uses a bandage "to stop the red flow" (Pierce 168), conveying the impression of an unstoppable wave of blood. Evins criticises Pierce's treatment of Alanna's menarche: while Alanna works hard and fairly successfully "to achieve equality and respect as a male," the presentation of menarche contradicts her representation as an equal to men by "reinforc[ing] Alanna's latent disgust with her body" (Evins 54). Her body is, after all, a female body, represented as leaking and uncontrollable, and as the healing woman points out (Pierce 174), there is no changing it.

Alanna's fear does not stem only from not knowing what her menstruation is. It is a sign that her carefully cultivated image as a young page is starting to crumble: she can no longer fully deny her femininity. Rosewarne points out that menstruation forces a girl to pay attention to her genitals, sometimes for the first time, "and thus compels her to accept her sex, if not also her vulnerability as a woman" (53). When Alanna realises that she is bleeding, she expresses her fear by biting her thumb "until it bled" (Pierce 168): it is as if she is trying to recourse the flow of blood to a more familiar, acceptable place. Evins suggests that despite the inherent link between the two, Alanna's initial panic "is not a direct response to menstruation" but "an unconscious, embodied reaction to what she perceives as an injury to her genitals; the shameful part of her body that she must keep hidden and secret to achieve her knighthood" (55). No matter what she does, her body is starting to catch up with her progress: she laments that her chest keeps growing, and asks if menstruation will slow her down (Pierce 175). Even though the answer is no, Alanna does not seem convinced: "I didn't ask to be born a girl. It's not fair" (Pierce 176). Alanna initially rejects the information that her fertility cycle is normal and will go on until she is too old to bear children, threatening to use her magic to change it, but finally resigns and

accepts the healer's words: "'You're a female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that'" (Pierce 174).

The chapter, appropriately titled "Womanhood," draws an immediate link between Alanna's menstruation and fertility – and stresses her role as a male-coded, cross-dressing heroine. The healing woman names menstruation both "woman's monthly cycle" and "fertility cycle" in one sentence, and explains that women cannot bear children until it begins (Pierce 173). She also proceeds to tell Alanna about the link between menstruation, sex (which she presents as pleasurable, also for women), and pregnancy, and gives her a charm against getting pregnant (Pierce 176). According to Evins, her "voice of reason" balances Alanna's panic and establishes menstruation as normal (55-56). Evins points out that the chapter also represents "the limited ways that we are prepared to discuss menstruation with young women through young adult literature" (57): while the chapter "attempts to portray periods in a positive light by directly discussing them and countering Alanna's initial dismay" (56), it fails to do so fully. Alanna's "initial rebellion against the idea of menstruating … signals to the young reader that periods are indeed negative" (Evins 55), and her fright at the sight of blood reinforces the image of "an unstoppable and monstrous red tide of blood" (Evins 53) in the reader's mind. Also, after the menarche chapter, menstruation is not presented again in the four-book series (Evins 56). Evins concludes that "[i]t is as if the taboo on menstruation can only be lifted to inform young women of the phenomenon" (57). And indeed, the novel does not return to the issues related to Alanna's womanhood after the eponymous chapter that serves puberty and sexuality to Alanna, and to the young reader, in a neatly tied packet.

David and Leigh Eddings's *Polgara the Sorceress* (1997) presents menarche very much the same way as Alanna, but the implications are much more negative, and fear and shame remain as the main emotions associated with menstruation. The girls' fear of their uncle finding out reflects the gendered nature of place and space (Rosewarne 3), and while a rite of passage – also in that Polgara's magical skills begin to manifest – menstruation is mostly presented as a disgusting disruption of life. It is neither empowering nor connected to sexuality, and after menarche, it does not occur again.

Polgara and her twin sister Beldaran start menstruating at the same time, but despite the first-person narrator, the text is even more circumspect than *Alanna*: "And then one morning we discovered that we had become women during the night.

There was some fairly visible evidence of the fact on our bed-clothing" (Eddings 35). The "visible evidence" is, of course, blood, but the only time it is mentioned by name is a little later when "mother gave us a somewhat clinical explanation for the bloodstains on our bedding" (Eddings 35). Unlike in *Alanna*, the explanation itself is not given – the text makes little attempt at didacticism, apart from mentioning that "it" will go on for a few days every month (Eddings 36), and assumes that the reader already knows all they need – or want – to know. Instead the reader gets treated to a spectacle of the girls' fear: Beldaran, distraught, asks if they are dying, and Polgara admits to being nearly as frightened as her sister (Eddings 35). The narrative focuses heavily on fear and shame, but these cannot only stem from the girls' ignorance because the feelings continue even after they learn what is going on.

Both *Polgara* and *Alanna* feature an older female character advising the newly menstruating characters, and in both novels, the adolescent girls need to reach out to her for guidance, rather than having been prepared beforehand. In *Alanna,* the lack of preparation is understandable given that Alanna was very young when she last presented as a girl. However, in *Polgara* this is odd given that their mother, despite not being physically present, communicates with her daughters telepathically on a regular basis, and apparently does not find it worth her while to inform them of any upcoming changes to their bodies. When asked, her initial answer also does little to dissuade their fears:

> "It's a natural process, Polgara. It happens to all women."
> "Make it stop!"
> "No. It has to happen." (Eddings 35)

Her reaction is far from helpful, and she does not give the "somewhat clinical explanation" until Polgara specifically asks her. Her answer presents menstruation as something inevitable that simply happens on an unsuspecting body, and her unwillingness to discuss the topic further suggests that it is shameful. The only part of her clinical explanation that the reader learns, via Polgara, is that she "says to get used to it, because it'll happen every month" (Eddings 36) – leaving Beldaran outraged. The girls' reactions are very like Alanna's: both reject their new menstrual reality, futilely rebelling against being subjected to regular bleeding. Whereas Alanna eventually resigns to the fact, we are not shown similar acceptance from Polgara and Beldaran, and menstruation remains something mysterious and scary.

Despite initial similar reactions, Polgara and Beldaran do not feel blindsided by the lack of information the same way that Alanna does: instead, their shock and fear are rooted more deeply in the process of menstruation itself, which they seem to find inherently shameful and disgusting. In *Alanna*, the healing woman manages to explain menstruation in a more positive manner, but its treatment in *Polgara* has a negative tone from start to finish. The girls are simply told that menstruation is their due and they had better accept it without question. There is, significantly, no word for menstruation: it is spoken of as "it" or "this," and as "'that time of the month'" (in quotation marks) which further distances the reader, but unlike the positive menstrual distancing via euphemisms, discussed in chapter 3.1, the outcome of this distancing is negative. It presents menstruation as something so shameful that one does not even have a name for it. Furthermore, menstruation is associated with negative moods, and not just in that Polgara and Beldaran are scared at its onset. The only time that they are reported to be menstruating besides menarche, discussed right after the menarche scene to have the topic dealt with once and for all, Beldaran is described as feeling mopey and Polgara as irritable (Eddings 36). Despite lack of scientific evidence (Newton 62), the trope that menstruation is synonymous with bad moods "exists as both a perceived truism in real life and certainly as such on screen" (Rosewarne 94), and obviously in literature as well. This perpetuates the stigma and negative connotations of menstruation.

Menstruation and shame are inherently connected in *Polgara*. The one thing that stops Polgara and Beldaran from dwelling too long on their new circumstances is the fear of their uncle finding out that they are menstruating. When Polgara suggests they get "this" cleaned up before he wakes up, Beldaran agrees fervently: "'Oh, dear Gods, yes! I'd *die* if he found out about this'" (Eddings 36). Her first question of "'Are we dying?'" (Eddings 35), expressing fear of the physical side of menstruation, has quickly adjusted into a conviction that being found out, especially by a man, would result in dying of shame. The reader is left to wonder just what kind of an explanation from their mother would so quickly transform their fear into shame: after all, the girls do live with their uncle and seem to be close to him otherwise. Polgara herself speculates that he must have been aware of what was going on, "but we never got around to discussing it for some reason" (Eddings 36). This comment is probably meant to be ironical: the narrator assumes it is obvious to the reader that it would never have occurred to them to have a mixed gender chat

about periods. *Polgara* presents menstruation as an ultimately female matter that men should have no knowledge of, which is perhaps why the outcome of the girls' menstruation lesson is not shared with the reader, who may potentially be male.

Apart from the clearly awkward treatment of menarche, menstruation is hardly mentioned again in the 750-page novel. However, there is another reference to it right after the menarche scene: the onset of puberty coinciding with the manifestation of magical skills. Polgara and Beldaran are twelve, it is "'that time of the month'" for both, and without meaning to or knowing she has the power, Polgara discovers that she can use magic. Her first spell comes to her unexpected: already feeling irritable because of her period and further irritated by her birds clamouring for more food, she accidentally makes seeds appear out of thin air (Eddings 36-37). The scene is not only connected to menstruation on the obvious levels – her mother cryptically mentioning that "something might happen" now that the girls had "reached a certain level of maturity" (Eddings 36), and Polgara menstruating during it. There is also the fact that until then, Polgara was not aware that her body was capable of such an outburst. Her magic comes to her as unexpectedly as her menarche did, and as her body leaks blood, it also leaks magic: in Grosz's words, hers is a body "which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions" (204). This scene slightly amends the thoroughly negative portrayal of menarche by associating menstruation not just with shame and bad moods, but with power. It connects with the views that various cultures have held on menstruation: menstrual blood is thought to have magical qualities, and menstruation is "a symbol of women's (often destructive) power" (Newton 23). However, where her mother was there to guide her through her menarche, it is her uncles who appear when she first leaks magic, reflecting the "common policing of female supernatural powers by male authority in fantasy fiction" (Milon 39). Despite the emergence of her talent coinciding with her period, magic is thus shown to be a matter subject to male guidance and the patriarchy. That being said, apart from the timing, Polgara's magic has little to do with her menstruation and seemingly more with her maturity, both menstruation and magic being signs of her growing up.

In her essay on children's fantasy, Maria Nikolajeva suggests that the "spiritual growth of the protagonist can be presented more tangibly when depicted in terms of struggle with eternal magic forces than in terms of inner tension" (61). While the magic forces that Nikolajeva discusses refer to significantly broader

narratives than the incident of a child protagonist's menarche, the same idea can be applied to the scenes discussed above. The emergence of magical powers makes the child protagonist's growth more tangible. Nikolajeva also suggests that "fantasy can empower a child protagonist in a way that realistic prose is incapable of doing" (61), and this is especially true in the case of menarche when it involves developing an affinity to magic. It adds a positive level to menstruation, whereas in reality, many newly menstruating people find little to feel positive about it.

The third instalment of Robin Hobb's *Tawny Man* trilogy, *Fool's Fate* (2003), has a rare and refreshing take on menarche: the book presents a positive coming-of-age ceremony. This approach demystifies menstruation and reinforces positive ideas about it, even if it is presented as culturally exotic and through the eyes of men who are clearly uncomfortable and surprised by it. The first-person narrator accompanies his cousin, Prince Dutiful, to the Out Islands home of his fiancée, Narcheska Elliania. By chance, they enter during Elliania's menarche ceremony and get treated to a surprising set of new customs. In the scene, menstruation is presented as a rite of passage that is both empowering and connected to sexuality (Rosewarne 3): Elliania emphasises her new fertility. To an extent, the scene also reflects the gendered nature of place and space in that the ceremony is held for girls only, but the fact that it seems customary to have men present underlines the less gendered nature of the Out Islands society. And even though menstruation is not mentioned again for the rest of the novel, it is not presented as disgusting or a disruption.

The Out Islands, being ultimately a Viking-inspired matriarchal society, are markedly different from the pseudo-medieval-European Six Duchies where the protagonists hail from. For instance, women take pride in their menstruation:

> "Have you no ceremony among your folk for this? A boy bloodies his sword to become a man, no? In his ability to kill, he announces that he is now complete. But a woman has no need of a sword. Eda herself bloodies us, and announces us as complete. What a man can take with a sword, a woman can give by flesh alone. Life." She set both her ringless hands on her flat belly. "I have shed my first woman's blood. I can bring forth life from within me. I stand before you all, a woman now." (Hobb, *Fate* 214)

The Out Islands culture distinguishes between genders but holds boys and girls to equal value: men take life, women give it. The fertility aspect of menstruation is prevalent: Elliania shows herself before her clan as "a blooded woman" who is now able to conceive (Hobb, *Fate* 214). Being able to give birth is a source of pride, and

given that the Islands are predominantly ruled by women, it can be assumed that pregnancy and things associated therewith do not carry a stigma. According to Rosewarne, "negative reactions from girls are most likely to transpire in cultures which don't celebrate menstruation – and which, frequently in fact, *denigrate* it" (46). The reactions of the Six Duchies men imply this may be the case in their home, but it does not hold true for the Out Islands. Elliania is clearly pleased with the arrival of her menstruation, shown both in her words and when she caresses her belly (Hobb, *Fate* 214) – and there is no reason that she should not be, given that her culture celebrates menstruation.

However, despite the admirable effort, menstruation is not fully normalised either. While presenting menstruation as a positive thing worthy of celebration and thus attempting to demystify it, the book also plays into the idea that women are intrinsically closer to nature and mystic powers – in this case, the goddess Eda, who "herself bloodies us" (Hobb, *Fate* 214). It is as if women have a personal connection to a deity who does not appear at all in the story, not even as a *dea ex machina*. The scene also perpetuates ideas of men as active and women as passive: as Narcheska Elliania says, it is the goddess Eda who initiates the girl's rite of passage, whereas "a boy bloodies his sword to become a man" (Hobb, *Fate* 214). For boys, growing up requires doing something, whereas it is enough for a girl simply to be, and maturing will happen inevitably.

The scene presents Narcheska Elliania as the Other, yet it manages to transcend preconceived notions and to show her in control of the situation. It underlines the contrast between the fully-clad, "normal" Six Duchies men and the markedly "exotic" Narcheska, who appears before them in her ceremony-garb that leaves her rouged nipples bare. To the men from the Six Duchies, and to the reader who is as little used to celebrating menarche and the female body as they are, it is an undeniably erotic scene: many of the men gasp when they see Elliania, the narrator feels a slight erection, and the Prince stares at the Narcheska "as if he had never seen a woman's breasts before" (Hobb, *Fate* 213). Yet though she is subjected to the male gaze at its peak, the narrator acknowledges that Narcheska Elliania retains her dignity. She stands straight, not sparing a glance for the Prince's gawking, and when she speaks, she maintains her calm despite having forgotten the ceremonial words (Hobb, *Fate* 214). She is so fully in control of the situation that in the end, the embarrassed Six Duchies people appear to the reader to have drawn the short straw

in not celebrating menarche. While *Fool's Fate* initially presents Elliania's menarche ceremony in an eroticised and exotic light, her own naturalness and calm subvert the Six Duchies men's discomfort and she prevails, giving the reader an opportunity to partake in her celebration.

In conclusion, first menstruation is often presented as scary, usually thanks to the characters' lack of information regarding it. Besides a rite of passage, it is often a disgusting disruption of life, and at the very least it highlights the gendered nature of place and space (Rosewarne 3). Menarche takes adolescent girl characters by surprise, coming upon them suddenly and often at night. Having no prior knowledge about menstruation may give the writer an opportunity to teach the adolescent reader, but this is by no means always the case. It can also be a form of exerting control on the adolescent girl characters and putting them in their place as females in a female body, henceforth represented as potential objects of sexual desire. Many characters also feel shame or anger about their menstruation. Sometimes it almost looks like the narrator is revelling in the characters' fear and shame, such as in *Polgara the Sorceress*. These depictions influence and reinforce the reader's views regarding menstruation, and they are especially problematic when dealing with menarche in a young adult fantasy book, thus passing the stigma on to a new generation of readers. In most novels, menstruation is not mentioned at all after menarche, providing the female character – or, perhaps more correctly, the prejudiced reader – an escape from what is portrayed as a disgusting disruption.

3.3 Fertility and Sexuality

One of the common menstruation portrayals that Rosewarne identified connects menstruation to sexuality and its absence to pregnancy (3): it is the result and signifier of the bleeder not being pregnant. When a girl starts her periods, she can get pregnant – and thus she is, technically, old enough to have sex, and Rosewarne suggests that menstruation can serve as "a subtle reminder to girls" of "the 'threat' of conception" (178). Despite fertility featuring regularly in menstruation terminology (e.g. "fertility cycle" (Pierce 173)), the questions of pregnancy and contraception are rarely addressed in fantasy: since the heroic narratives that fantasy presents focus on the male experience and characters in traditionally female roles are interpreted as more negative than male-coded heroines (Milon 47), pregnancy is rarely given the main stage in a narrative. Women may sleep around, but if they are concerned about

getting pregnant, they rarely show it, especially when the book is also silent on menstruation. The focus on sex while disregarding the risk of pregnancy highlights the escapist attitude fantasy takes towards the female body: pleasure is more important than realism. There are, however, a few exceptions to this rule: some writers like to put their female protagonists at liberty to have as much sex as they please by explicitly giving them some form of contraception.

Besides pregnancy, menarche may be directly connected to sexuality and a young girl character's sex appeal may increase with it: Rosewarne suggests that the sexiness of young female bodies in films such as *Carrie* and the *Blue Lagoon* is connected at least in part to their bleeding (124). *A Song of Ice and Fire* draws a direct link between menarche and sexual maturity – when a girl starts menstruating, she is old enough to marry and therefore to have sex (Martin, "Age of Sexual Relations"). This is especially visible in the case of Asha Greyjoy, who recalls her first sexual adventures:

> Her first flowering had come upon her during the war and wakened her desire, but even before that Asha had been curious. *He was there, he was mine own age, and he was willing, that was all it was… that, and the moon blood*" (Martin, *Feast* 241).

Asha acknowledges that her burgeoning desire burst into full bloom when her menstruation started, and she chose to let a boy fondle her, and would have let him do "more than that if he'd been bold enough" (Martin, *Feast* 241), because her period wakened her sexuality. The quote offers two different readings: menstruating may have roused Asha's lust so that she (would have) had sex while on her period; or she may only have become sexually active after she started menstruating. In early modern England, menarche was "viewed as a time of sexual awakening" (S. Read 63), and to Asha this certainly seems to have been the case. Like in many other narratives, contraception is linked to sexuality: after Asha first has sex with a man a short time later, she finds a woods witch and learns how to brew her own contraceptive/abortive moon tea (Martin, *Feast* 243).

In most narratives, menarcheal girls are not as quick to get naked as Asha, and the focus remains on fertility. When Alanna's period starts in *Alanna: The First Adventure*, the healing woman straightforwardly links it to pregnancy by telling Alanna of its role in conception (Pierce 173-74), and that it will pause if Alanna gets pregnant (Pierce 175-76). When Alanna tells her that she does not plan on having children, the healing woman proceeds to give her a charm against pregnancy (Pierce

175-76), a "gold symbol dangling from a thin cord" (Pierce 179). Since Alanna's disinterest in having a baby does not surprise her and she parts with the charm without too much ado or even naming a price (Pierce 175), she presumably has a stash of them readily available. This implies that contraception is easily accessible to women in the world. Like the topic of menstruation itself, fertility and contraception are thus quickly addressed and need not be returned to in the series. Instead, Alanna is from then on theoretically free to have as much sex (which, as the healing woman points out, women enjoy too (Pierce 175-176)) as she wishes without having to worry about getting pregnant.

Menstruation in connection to fertility is also present in Robin Hobb's *Liveship Traders* trilogy (1998–2000), which contains a magical substance called wizardwood. Among other things, wizardwood is used to make contraceptive and STD-preventing charms that women, especially prostitutes, wear as navel rings (Hobb, *Destiny* 228). Protagonist Althea Vestrit has one, and after she first has sex with Brashen Trell, she recounts to him the story of her teenage pregnancy scare that led to her getting it:

> "We got to Bingtown a couple of weeks later. And I was sure I must be pregnant. … So I went to my married sister Keffria, sure that she could advise me. … She started crying, and told me I was ruined forever. … Four or five days later, my blood days came, right on time. I found her alone and told her … But she didn't yell at me or anything. She hardly spoke at all when she gave me the navel ring. Just told me that if I wore it, I wouldn't get pregnant or diseased, and that it was the least that I owed my family." (Hobb, *Magic* 500-01)

Here Althea's menstruation is a marker of fertility, showing that she is not pregnant. Her scare is, as Rosewarne puts it, a subtle reminder that sex may lead to pregnancy (178), but the skull navel ring that her more prim and proper sister gives her means that there will be no more scares, and for instance the sex that she has with Brashen will not result in pregnancy. In addition to the wizardwood navel rings, the *Liveship Traders* brings up another substance which can affect the feminine reproductive system: a drug called *cindin*, similar to snuff in its usage. Using it before sex may boost one's sex drive – as Brashen tells Althea after their sex, "'I've heard it affects women that way, sometimes. Most women don't use it much you know, because it can, um, make you bleed. Even when it's not your time'" (Hobb, *Magic* 501). Inducing menstruation is an interesting side effect, and certainly an idea that does not come up often.

Absent menstruation as a sign of pregnancy is not frequent but present in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. There are not many missing periods in *ASoIaF*, perhaps because only one POV character gets pregnant during the series. However, it is not fully absent. When Daenerys Targaryen first gets pregnant, she is aware of it well before her handmaiden points it out (Martin, *Game* 236), so although it is not specified, we can deduce that her absent menstruation played a part. Similarly, Daenerys's difficulty in remembering when she last bled in *A Dance with Dragons*, discussed further in chapter 4.4, can be interpreted as a sign of pregnancy and miscarriage even though it is presented to the reader as menstruation (Martin, *Dance* 1029). In *A Storm of Swords*, Catelyn Stark thinks back to when she and her sister Lysa Arryn married their husbands:

> Afterward, when their moon blood did not come at the accustomed time, Lysa had gushed happily of the sons she was certain they carried. … But Lysa's blood had come not long after, and all the joy had gone out of her. Catelyn had always thought that Lysa had simply been a little late, but if she had been with child… (Martin, *Storm* 38-39)

Lysa is happy about her missing period, thinking she is pregnant, and consequently disappointed when her menstruation inevitably shows her that she is not; or rather, as Catelyn later deduces, not pregnant *any more* since their father coerced her to abort a premarital pregnancy (Martin, *Storm* 39). Indeed, where there is pregnancy, there are also ways to end it. Women in *ASoIaF* who want to prevent or abort a pregnancy drink *moon tea*, administered by woods witches or maesters.[13] It is used by sexually active women (Martin, *Feast* 243; 274) and protective parents (Martin, *Storm* 1114) alike, and according to Martin, it is based on real abortifacients ("A Myriad of Questions"). There is a connection to menstruation in its name: the tea induces bleeding, i.e. brings about one's moon blood – as Sara Read argues, it was customary in early modern England to believe that all aspects of vaginal bleeding were related to menstruation (1).

Menstruation is not the only time when blood may come out of a vagina. A woman may also bleed the first time she has penetrative intercourse, i.e. "loses her virginity".[14] Rosewarne writes that "in scenes whereby … sex is a narrative theme,

[13] Scholars and healers, often advisors to noble families.

[14] I have chosen to use quotation marks when discussing "virginity" because it is a social construct. The hymen is a permanent part of the vagina, and while it may sometimes tear during first penetrative intercourse, bleeding in most cases results from rough penetration with insufficient lubrication.

blood has two other likely interpretations: virginity loss and … *menstruation*" (136). Historically, there has been a perceived link between all kinds of vaginal bleeding (Read 1), and many societies have not differentiated between menstrual and hymenal blood. Various writers throughout European history have theorised that "menarche and deflowering are inextricably linked" (Delaney et al. 32), and the connection is further emphasised in terminology: in early modern England, the latter was called the "flower of virginity" (S. Read 34), evoking images of "flowers," a term commonly used for menstruation, as discussed in chapter 3.1. It seems that "virginity loss" scenes that involve blood are vastly more common than menstruation scenes even though not all women bleed when first experiencing vaginal penetration.

Views on virginity in *A Song of Ice and Fire* correspond closely with those in early modern England. Hymenal bleeding was thought to be the ultimate proof of defloration, yet "a lack of bleeding on first intercourse does not signify that a woman was not a virgin (S. Read 142-43), as seen in a discussion regarding Queen Cersei's daughter-in-law Margaery:

> "Did you chance to see the marriage bed the morning after?" Cersei asked. "Did she bleed?"
> "No sheet was shown, Your Grace."
> *A pity.* Still, the absence of a bloody sheet meant little, by itself. Common peasant girls bled like pigs upon their wedding nights, she had heard, but that was less true of highborn maids like Margaery Tyrell. A lord's daughter was more likely to give her maidenhead to a horse than a husband, it was said, and Margaery had been riding since she was old enough to walk. (Martin, *Feast* 585)

Here *ASoIaF* acknowledges that not all women bleed during their first vaginal intercourse: activities such as horse-riding – that highborn girls often engage in – may cause the hymen to tear. Martin also borrows from the early modern tradition of escorting a married gentry couple to bed with bawdy humour, in *ASoIaF* called the *bedding ceremony*, "symbolically repeating this focus on bleeding even though the idea of publicly displaying the bed-linen was seen as old-fashioned and foreign" (S. Read 135). Despite the interest in bleeding, it seems that the sheets were usually not displayed after the wedding night in *ASoIaF*.

However, *ASoIaF* is somewhat special in acknowledging that bleeding and first penetrative intercourse are not necessarily interconnected. It is far more typical of fantasy, and literature in general, to savour scenes where a girl experiences

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Moreover, whether or not somebody has had penetrative sex is not a valid measure of their value as a person, even though it has been used as such.

bleeding and pain while first having penetrative vaginal sex. After raping Lena in *Lord Foul's Bane* (1977), the first book of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* series by Stephen R. Donaldson, Covenant sees "the blood on her loins" (83); given that the scene is a rape, discussing Lena's pain further would be unnecessary and gratuitous. More consensually, *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) by Marion Zimmer Bradley relishes Morgaine's bloody virginity loss ritual with a boy who represents the Horned One (206). These bloody first-sex scenes are part of a wider narrative: that of rendering blood acceptable if it is shed by a man. Buckley and Gottlieb suggest that because in most cultures ritual bloodletting is performed almost exclusively by men, menstruation may "constitute a symbolic anomaly," being possibly the only routine act of bloodletting for women and thus easy to perceive as "out of place" (27). Freely flowing menstrual blood differs markedly from the view that blood "should be kept within the bounds of the body and only released through injury, or when blood is drawn" (Newton 34). Thus, it is not vaginal bleeding itself that is problematic and should be avoided, but the fact that literature written within the patriarchal context curbs away from depictions of the "wrong" kind of blood: menstrual blood, that which is not shed by a man.

In mainstream fantasy, scenes where a girl "loses her virginity" exceedingly focus on the consequences of penetration as imagined by a man: the pain and the blood, neither of which may actually be present during first vaginal penetration. Delaney et al. argue that menstrual and hymenal blood continue to be associated in the male unconscious and the psychological impact of a bloody penis is the same regardless of the source of the blood (31). Therefore, the bias towards portraying blood in connection to the first vaginal penetration, and at the expense of menstruation, can be read as a male attempt to claim a female bodily function. Presenting blood in the vagina is more acceptable if it has been shed in a male-performed "ritual" – penetration – rather than when its flow is natural, which is why "virginity loss" scenes may be bloody even in books where menstruation is not portrayed at all. Milon writes about female characters' expectations to "live up to the image of a 'strong, independent woman', yet not to seem an emasculating threat to men" (47-48), and bloody virginity loss scenes are arguably a way for the male-focused narrative to put the potentially emasculating female in her place. Like the trend to portray sex without a thought for pregnancy, portraying "virginal" bleeding

while excluding menstruation emphasises fantasy's double standard on representing women: they are wanted as attractive bodies yet denied their own corporeality.

In conclusion, menstruation can be presented as a mark of fertility and readiness to have sex. In some narratives, it is used to denote pregnancy, but this seems to be rarer than in real life. Sometimes books do not address the connection between menstruation, sex and pregnancy at all, but in some cases, such as *The Liveship Traders*, *Alanna: The First Adventure*, and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, there are – sometimes magical, sometimes natural – contraceptive options. Portraying blood in connection to a woman's first penetrative intercourse is more common than portraying menstruation, arguably because blood shed by a man is more acceptable than naturally flowing menstrual blood. This, along with the idea that a woman's availability for sex may be considered more important for the narrative than its potential consequences for her, is connected to the double standard in which the female body is represented in fantasy: she is attractive as long as she bows to the male narrative.

3.4 Superstitions and Sexist Harassment

One of the most common fictional menstruation tropes presents it as disgusting (Rosewarne 3). There are several superstitions and fears associated with menstruation across various cultures, and although women in Europe and America are rarely isolated or abstain from activities such as cooking during menstruation, they follow unspoken rules of conduct, and for example menstrual sex is still presented as abnormal (Rosewarne 76). While most superstitions regarding the supernatural quality of menstruation have disappeared from the Euro-American culture, a variety of beliefs surrounding periods still exists. Most of these are somewhat sexist ideas about how menstruation affects women. Popular culture narratives attribute several qualities to menstruating women: irrationality, irritability and moodiness the chief among them. These beliefs are modern-day superstitions, and the oft-heard jokes about menstrual rage perpetuate the myth: according to Delaney et al., "[t]he myth that menstruation means madness touches on another myth: the idea that the menstruating woman is disgusting, if not taboo" (201). The existence of the premenstrual syndrome (PMS) – something Euro-American culture takes for granted – has also been questioned in scientific research: a systematic 2012 review "failed to provide clear evidence in support of a specific negative mood

syndrome associated with menstruation in the general population" (Newton 62). Fictional narratives sometimes use menstruation to put everyone in danger: Rosewarne discusses scenes where menarche "ignited the evil" (85) in films such as *Carrie* (1976) and *Pitch Black* (2000). When menstruation is brought up with a superstitious intent in fantasy fiction, it is often by presenting women's blood as dangerous – or at the very least, powerful – or misogynistically implying that menstruation influences women's temperament or cognitive skills.

The danger menstruation poses in fantasy narratives may not rely on women's intentional ill will, reflecting European superstitions in which menstrual blood was thought to be harmful regardless of whether the menstruating woman wanted it or not: it was thought to pose a threat to men and men's creations, "causing agricultural crops to fail and man-made material things to lose their lustre" (Newton 25). Robin Hobb's *The Liveship Traders* trilogy features sailor superstitions known from actual historical narratives, and introduces a motif that is present in many contemporary narratives: that of menstruation putting everybody in danger (Rosewarne 85). One of these superstitions extends to women on board a ship. Brashen Trell explains to Althea Vestrit that one of the reasons women are usually not hired as sailors on Chalcedean ships is their menstruation: "They believe a woman aboard a ship will draw serpents after you. Because women bleed, you know. Lots of sailors say that" (Hobb, *Magic* 260). While Brashen seems to acknowledge that it is a foreign superstition in that he talks about it as something *other* sailors do, he does not seem to question it for himself. The belief that women on ships brought bad luck is grounded in real life sailor superstitions, although records stress the distraction women provided, not menstruation, as the primary reason ("Top 20 Sailing Superstitions"). But to this day, girls are subjected to the idea that the smell of menstrual blood can attract wild carnivores, such as sharks or lions.

Menstrual blood has been thought to represent "women's perceived power, both creative and destructive" (Newton 20), and sometimes the power is presented as more active: the stigma against menstrual sex draws on the notion that menstrual blood poses a physical danger. In Euro-American culture the superstition can be traced back to Leviticus,[15] and its roots are in the perceived uncleanliness of

[15] "And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even" (*King James Bible*, Leviticus 15:19).

menstrual blood as well as the belief that menstruating women emit *mana*, a "threatening supernatural power" that may put both the menstruating woman and the people around her at risk (Delaney et al. 7). European culture incorporated views of menstrual sex as mainly dangerous to *men*, not women (Delaney et al. 20), and in medieval medical writing "sexual intercourse during menstruation was commonly seen as a cause of leprosy or deformity in any conceived offspring" (Green 57). In fiction, menstrual sex is a rarity. Rosewarne argues that on-screen portrayals of menstrual sex contrast with reality: according to a number of studies, the menstrual sex taboo seems to be in decline (78), yet "the idea that menstrual sex is not *normal* remains a standard on-screen presentation" (76). Fantasy fiction can hardly be said to have a standard presentation regarding menstrual sex, but because such scenes are few and far between, it seems reasonable to extend the argument to fantasy: if menstrual sex was deemed normal, it would probably appear more often per se and not just as a reason *not* to have sex. Chapter 4.3 contains a reading of menstrual sex reinforcing the image of Queen Cersei Lannister as a transgressive and indulgent character in *ASoIaF*.

The idea that menstruation can stop sex from happening is present in the third part of Robin Hobb's *Liveship Traders* trilogy, *Ship of Destiny* (2000), in which menstruation is presented as a combination of empowering and disgusting (Rosewarne 3), depending on the perspective. One of the plotlines follows two women, Kekki and Malta, rescued from the ocean onto a foreign ship from the nation of Chalced. The Chalcedeans are known throughout the trilogy for their patriarchal values and low regard for women, especially compared to the nations from which the rescued women come: the more liberal and decadent Jamaillia to the south, and the city of Bingtown which has a long history of equality. The women manage to avoid sexual violence from the sailors and empower themselves by using the Chalcedean disgust of menstruation to protect themselves. Kekki, who is older and more experienced in the ways of the world, advises Malta to wear a bloody rag between her legs:

> "Here. Wear this… between your legs. Always. If a man touches you, say *Fa-chejy kol*. Means 'I bleed.' He will stop… when you say it… or when he sees this. … Chalced men fear a woman's blood time. They say– … A woman's parts are angry then. They can slay a man's." (Hobb, *Destiny* 276)

Kekki believes – rightly, as it turns out – that the mere threat of menstruation should be enough to keep the potentially abusive sailors at bay, and the bloody rag is just a precaution in case one of them should disbelieve Malta and try to rape her: menstrual sex carries such a stigma among the Chalcedeans that the sight of blood will be enough to stop the would-be rapist. Delaney et al. claim that "the extensiveness of menstrual taboos in a society reflects the society's degree of castration anxiety" because menstruating women (and witches) are seen as the "archetypal castrating females" (163), and the idea that a woman's parts are angry plays into the concept of castration fears and the *vagina dentata*. Indeed, castration anxiety is what keeps the Chalcedeans from having menstrual sex: it is the fear that the woman's angry, bleeding vagina will slay the penis. Rosewarne writes that in contemporary film and television narratives, women are usually the ones to object to menstrual sex while men rarely see it as a barrier (82). This does not apply in the case of Chalcedean sailors; it is the men who are afraid of menstrual blood. One possible explanation for the difference is that the narratives Rosewarne discusses are consensual: it is an idea worth exploring that menstruation, while not stopping sex per se, may thwart rape in fictional narratives.

Another common theme present in the scene is sex avoidance. It is a popular view, both in fictional and real-life narratives, that women may use menstruation as an excuse not to have sex – not the least because men very rarely contest their claim (Rosewarne 154). In advising Malta to wear a bloody cloth between her legs, Kekki is preparing her for a situation in which her claim would, in fact, get contested. The possibility further underlines the lack of respect the Chalcedeans have for women: by contesting Malta's claim that she is on her period, they would overstep the line of what the reader will find acceptable; namely, periods being a woman's business (Rosewarne 19). This highlights the Chalcedeans' crude representation. However, like menstruation itself, sex avoidance on the account of menstruation is not a very frequent topic in fantasy fiction and seems to be more popular in film and television: of the books discussed in this thesis, *Ship of Destiny* contains the only example of it.

Despite Malta and Kekki's empowering utilisation of the Chalcedean superstition that having sex with a menstruating woman is dangerous, the scene offers an ambiguous portrayal of menstruation. Rosewarne discusses the motivation behind demonising menstruation: "Rather than simply, arbitrarily, hating women based on different chromosomes, *instead*, menstruation as a messy female bodily

function is considered at the root of women's weakness, subordination, and thus, is loathed as a subtler method of misogyny" (86-87). The Chalcedean misogyny surrounding menstruation does not revolve around women's weakness: rather, it is connected to the idea of an inherent feminine evil which both demonises and mystifies women. Whereas many narratives like to focus on women's temperament and perceived irritability during their periods, the chapter focuses on their genitals instead, implying that the menstruating woman herself can do little to nothing about her "angry parts". This draws from the myths of "'open' cervixes prone to infection, blood-borne bacteria infecting men, and children born with leprosy" (Freidenfelds 27-28), and renders women passive carriers of vaginal death. However, while menstruation is portrayed negatively among the Chalcedeans, the idea against menstrual sex presented in the book is not necessarily negative per se. While the scene implies that menstrual blood is disgusting, the context provides another interpretation. The Chalcedeans are presented as superstitious compared to the more down-to-earth female protagonists, with whom the reader is familiar and thus expected to support, rather than the crude and abusive sailors who clearly pose a threat to them. Therefore, although the narrative suggests that the menstruating vagina is dangerous, it also nudges the reader to consider that believing so may be preposterous.

Not all power menstrual blood has been thought to have is destructive (Newton 20): it has a connection to witchcraft and magic (Buckley and Gottlieb 34-36). Fictional witches are typically either very old (menopausal or post-menopausal) or very young (not long past menarche), and very rarely in their childbearing years, during which the primary role of menstruation – or lack thereof – is to act as a "guide to fertility" (Delaney et al. 162). Notions about the magical potency of menstrual blood are tied to menarche narratives in fantasy fiction: when a young female character's affinity to magic is relevant for a narrative, its emergence is often connected to menarche, as discussed in chapter 3.2 in connection to David and Leigh Eddings's *Polgara the Sorceress* whose protagonist's magical skills are linked to her menarche. In *Polgara*, the Eddingses draw a direct link between menarche and magic as Polgara and Beldaran's mother vaguely tells them that something might happen shortly after the onset of their menstruation (36), and indeed it does – Polgara is menstruating when she discovers that she is able to use magic (36-37). On the other hand, Tamora Pierce's Alanna in *Alanna: The First Adventure* has had her magical

Gift since childhood – and when her period starts, she contemplates trying to magic her menstruation away (174) – but quickly realises that she cannot use her magic on her body, and her magic grows stronger as she, too, grows. Both menarche narratives are examples of menstrual blood as a sign of women's creative power: even though the treatment menstruation receives in *Polgara* is otherwise negative, the manifestation of magic is presented as positive as Polgara creates seeds out of thin air (36-37).

In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) Elizabeth Grosz discusses the mind and body dichotomy and women's corporeal specificity. She points out that while women's bodies are seen to limit inherently their capacity to equality, there is also another view, equally influenced by the patriarchy and misogyny: that women are regarded as "somehow more natural," more attuned to their bodies and physical surroundings than men because their "bodies and experiences are seen to provide women with a special insight, something that men lack" (Grosz 15). This may explain why there are so many more scenes in fantasy fiction that draw a correlation between the start of menstruation and the development of a magical ability in a young girl, than there are scenes featuring a pubescent boy who suddenly discovers he has magical powers through a similar rite of passage. According to Grosz, the correlation and association of the mind and body opposition with the male and female opposition is "not contingent or accidental but is central to the ways in which philosophy has historically developed and still sees itself even today" (4). Knowingly or not, fantasy fiction follows this standard. The appearance of magical powers in female characters often coinciding with their menarche is a continuation of the dichotomy in which women are perceived to be more attuned to their bodies but also more prone to their unpredictabilities and irregularities (Grosz 14). It seems that female magic works directly through women's bodies and cannot fully develop until the would-be sorceress starts menstruating, while all that the aspiring male magician needs to start casting spells is a curious mind. This view contributes to the projection of masculinity as the unquestioned norm (Grosz 188), and the notion that women's bodies are enigmatic and unknowable.

The most common menstruation superstition that the average woman will encounter is related to the idea that menstruation affects one's mood (Rosewarne 94), which is often a cause for sexist harassment. George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series features instances where men use menstruation as a derogatory

explanation for a woman's bad mood. Interestingly this only seems to target one character: Brienne of Tarth, a homely female knight who is taller and stronger than most men, and very literally a male-coded heroine in that she dresses in armour and cherishes ideals of knightly chivalry. In a quip highlighting the gendered nature of place and space (Rosewarne 3), Jaime Lannister suggests that Brienne murdered King Renly, whom she loved and was sworn to protect, because she was on her period:

> "Tell me true, one kingslayer to another – did the Starks pay you to slit his throat, or was it Stannis? Had Renly spurned you, was that the way of it? Or perhaps your moon's blood was on you. Never give a wench a sword when she's bleeding" (Martin, *Storm* 157-58).

Jaime's comment implies that menstruation makes women act so inconsistently as to murder someone they love. It is unlikely that Jaime really believes this to be the case because he has a twin sister and, as discussed in chapter 4.3, menstruation does not seem to bother him. Because he is trying to provoke Brienne to fight in the scene quoted, he is most likely replicating a cultural narrative, trying to get under Brienne's skin by reminding her that she is a woman and can never be a true knight.

In a later scene Brienne is fighting for her life against three men, and one of her attackers says to another: "'You get her … Did you see what she did to Pyg? She's mad with moon blood'" (Martin, *Feast* 420). Like Jaime, these men are essentially trying to put Brienne in her place, reminding her that no matter how big and strong she is, and no matter that she just killed their friend while they have not managed to hurt her, she is still just a woman and thus by definition their inferior. This is sadly reminiscent of menstruation-related sexism in contemporary Western culture: it is not rare at all for a man to suggest that an angry or assertive woman is, perhaps, "on the rag." Rosewarne sees this as a result of a social hierarchy of emotions where masculinity, and the emotions associated therewith, are held in higher esteem than femininity and "feminine" emotions:

> By attributing women's undesirable emotions to menstruation, the woman gets undermined based on her biology: the interference being that her "bad" behavio[u]r is attributable to her biology and thus is feminine, permanent, and enduringly problematic. (Rosewarne 96)

This is what the men who taunt Brienne are doing – they bring up her menstruation to show her that her biology is their inferior even if she is physically more than a

match for any one of them, and thus she herself is lesser than they. Given this, it is interesting that while Brienne is a point of view (POV) character for eight chapters, we do not ever see her menstruating.

Superstitions connected to menstruation seem to be vastly more common in real life than fantasy narratives, most likely because menstruation is mentioned so rarely in fantasy in the first place: it is enough of a transgression to bring it up, and there is no need to discuss it further. There are, however, some recurring contexts for menstruation-related superstitions. It is connected to the idea of women's blood being dangerous, for example in that women are not hired as sailors in *The Liveship Traders* and menstrual blood is portrayed as so repulsive that it can thwart rape – but on the other hand, people who fear it are shown as crude and superstitious. Fantasy adheres to the menstrual sex stigma in that it is shown even more rarely: most books that bring up menstruation do not do so in the context of sex, and while sex avoidance on the account of menstruation is a popular enough trope in contemporary narratives, fantasy fiction is mostly silent on that. Menstruation in fantasy is also connected to women's magic. It has historically represented women's creative and destructive powers, and there are echoes of this in that magical talents often emerge in connection with menarche, like in *Polgara the Sorceress*. This may be connected to the mind/body dichotomy and the view that women are more natural and connected to their bodies than men, in which case it would make sense that their magic is also more corporeal. Like in the real world, there are sexist superstitions connected to menstruation in fantasy fiction. These may include notions of menstrual rage, irritability and moodiness, and they are used to show a woman her place in a misogynistic society.

3.5 Menstrual Management and Male-Passing Menstruators

In all the scenes discussed so far, women hide their menstruation: even Elliania does not bleed freely in her menarche ceremony (Hobb, *Fate* 214). Women throughout history have had to take care of their menstruation one way or another. History knows various forms of menstrual management, ranging from free bleeding to soft papyrus "tampons" used in Ancient Egypt ("Tampon History"). It is noteworthy that much of the disgust at menstruation today is directed at menstrual products – Newton argues that ridiculing sanitary products is "a form of social control which draws

attention to women's bodies as though being in need of 'tending' or 'repair', and thus reinforces patriarchal normativity over them" (161). This ridiculing is not present in fantasy fiction, perhaps because one cannot ridicule what is not there: menstrual products hardly ever show up in fantasy narratives.

Hiding one's menstruation has long been a cultural priority. Young girls learn from very early on, through "implicit and explicit messages … from all sides" (Newton 94), to keep their menstruation private lest people might know, for exposing one's menstruation would result in shame and stigma – a topic that writers sometimes use for dramatic value, such as Stephen King in his horror novel *Carrie*. The idea of keeping menstruation away from public view is tied to idea of menstrual blood as polluting: women manage their periods "so that the blood is contained and does not pollute the immediate environment by soiling clothes and chairs" (Newton 167). At the heart of the issue is the expectation that women must constantly produce a fresh, attractive female body that has no room for smells, fluids, or leakage; and that when a girl starts menstruating, "she should take care of her body with as little public commotion, and visibility, as possible" (Newton 96-97). If fantasy heroines menstruate, they manage it behind the scenes (even when stranded in the wilderness), complying to the patriarchal norm of producing an attractive body to the reader.

When fantasy fiction brings up menstrual management, it often reflects how it was historically done, but only to an extent. According to Sara Read, menstrual management in early modern England was very personal and thus a question that was not recorded openly (105): women hardly addressed menstruation even in their private diaries (93-94). Evidence suggests that the preferred method of managing one's menstruation was using folded cloths known as "clouts" or "rags" to absorb the menstrual flow (S. Read 106). S. Read also speculates that when one had no access to spare linen or did not bleed very heavily, it was probably deemed normal to allow menstrual blood to seep onto one's shift (111); in the middle ages and early modern period, women's clothes were so heavy that free bleeding would hardly cause one to be exposed. However, today's Euro-American culture sees free bleeding as outlandish, in large part due to the idea that menstruation ought to be kept private: in 2015 Instagram removed artist Rupi Kaur's photo of bloodstains on her trousers and bed twice even though it did not violate the community standards (Saul). The absence of free bleeding is an example of the casual anachronism regarding gender that is present in a lot of history-inspired fiction. Fantasy is never strictly historical

even when heavily based on a particular period in history, and it has a tendency to overrule historical customs. This may happen because study of history and the patriarchy reinforce each other: as Jo Walton pointed out at Worldcon 75 regarding the historical representation of gender, "women are there, but when canon gets formed, women get left out." Menstrual anachronism may be the result of ignorance, but its most probable cause is the contrast to contemporary narratives: historically accurate treatment of menstruation would make the reader and the writer uncomfortable. Thus, despite its apparent historical normalcy, free bleeding is an exception rarely found in fantasy.

One of the most common instances when fantasy literature deals with menstruation is when it disrupts life (Rosewarne 3) by virtue of being a female matter: when a woman attempts to pass as a man for an extended period of time and needs to hide her period.[16] Even though managing one's menstruation privately is supposedly a cultural norm in the novels discussed here, the privacy is seemingly maintained simply by leaving out mentions of a female character's menstruation when she is presenting as female. The question of menstrual management only comes up at menarche, or when a woman is pretending to be a man.

While the existence of menstruation is acknowledged several times in Robin Hobb's *Liveship Traders* trilogy, the question of how to hide it only comes up once: when Althea Vestrit decides to dress as a man to secure employment on a ship. She receives help from Amber, an ambiguously gendered character who is presenting as female in the trilogy and who advises her on how to hide her menstruation:

> Amber had shown her to fold dark-colored stockings to use as blood rags. "Dirty socks you can always explain," Amber had told her. "Cultivate a fastidious personality. Wash your clothing twice as much as anyone else does, and no one will question it after a time. And learn to need less sleep. For you will either have to rise before any others or stay up later in order to keep the privacy of your body." (Hobb, *SoM* 363)

Amber addresses the topic of menstrual management for a crowded and fairly public setting. She points out that a dark rag will hide the bloodstains, and the illusion of fastidiousness and privacy allow for Althea's menstrual management without evoking suspicion from her shipmates. While there is an obvious reason for Althea to hide her menstruation – she is afraid of her actual gender being discovered – the need

[16] In the examples I have found it is always a cis woman pretending to be male. Trans characters, in as much as they are represented in fantasy, will certainly face this challenge too, and to a larger degree.

to keep one's bleeding private is neither new nor essentially tied to such a charade, but has been a fact of life for women through the ages. Women have tended to keep their menstruation away from public view as a rule, and considering this, it is interesting that it deserves attention in fantasy narratives only when the issue at stake is successfully passing as a man.

Tamora Pierce's Alanna in *Alanna: The First Adventure* likewise needs to take care of her menstruation while passing as male. Before she has a chance to talk to a healing woman, she tries to manage her menstruation as well as she can: she finds a bandage and uses it vaguely "to stop the red flow" (Pierce 168). She seems to have managed well enough so far, but the healing woman gives her more comprehensive advice; namely to "bathe each day" and "bandage yourself, of course" (Pierce 175), presuming – correctly, given that Alanna was able both to wash herself and to bundle her sheets down the privy without leaving her room (Pierce 168) – that Alanna has access to privacy while bathing. This advice is more related to Alanna's menarche than her charade. While Alanna is worried her male friends will find out that she has been lying to them about her gender (Pierce 177), she does not seem to be concerned about accidentally leaking while training with them, or about travelling with them in less privacy than what she is used to at the castle. She will presumably continue to wash and bandage herself, but the reader is neither shown how she does this (does she wash her used bandages, or shove them down the privy; and do the servants wonder for what a young page needs so much cloth?), nor how she manages not to get caught despite living and training in close quarters with a bunch of boys. Menstruation is not brought up in the series after Alanna's menarche, and the books never need to address these questions.

George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series mostly follows the early modern English menstrual management customs that Sara Read lists (105-111), and menstruation is discussed more extensively than in the books analysed so far. When Sansa Stark begins her period, discussed in detail in chapter 4.2, she gets a "cloth to wear between her legs" (Martin, *Clash* 759); and when Jaime Lannister has sex with his sister Cersei, he discovers that she is menstruating when he tears off her smallclothes and presumably finds them bloody (Martin, *Storm* 851), discussed in chapter 4.3. Both Sansa and Cersei are high-born women, easily able to access spare linen and not required to bleed onto their shifts. There is no evidence in the text of how less wealthy women manage their menstruation. When Arya Stark is working as

a fish vendor in Braavos, her chapter mentions a girl with whom she works who "took to her bed with her moon blood" (Martin, *Feast* 726), and while this could mean that the girl had no way to manage her menstruation – something many girls still face, especially in developing countries, and a contributor to education and pay discrepancies between men and women – it could also be a nod towards the physical discomfort that menstruation causes to many women, such as cramps. While alone in the wilderness, all that Daenerys Targaryen can do about her period is wash her legs as well she can (Martin, *Dance* 1029). However, as discussed in chapter 4.4, the scene is presented as empowering: Daenerys transcends the stigma, retaining, and to an extent even regaining, her dignity while bleeding freely.

Fantasy fiction rarely enforces strict norms on what women are allowed to do – even when a society's gender roles are largely set, the heroines whom the story follows often adopt a traditionally male role because it allows for more agency (Milon 47). Milon suggests that "realistic female characters do not belong in male heroic narratives" (50), and nowhere is this more evident than in the representation of menstruation. Even when there are many female characters, periods are not addressed in everyone's storyline: there are women who bleed (perhaps once, perhaps more) and women who do not. To consider *ASoIaF*, it is understandable that minor POV characters such as Arianne Martell or Melisandre, whose storylines only encompass a few chapters, do not menstruate, but menstruation hardly comes up in Arya Stark's or Brienne of Tarth's storylines either, despite both being subjects to several POV chapters. In Arya's case it is reasonable to assume that she has not yet started menstruating as she is just 9–11 years old in the series, but there is also another reading: both Brienne and Arya are tomboys, often mistaken for males and engaging in male activities. Barbara Creed sees the tomboy as a threat because "her image undermines patriarchal gender boundaries that separate the sexes" (111), but Martin gives his tomboys leeway in not making them menstruate. In doing so, he both makes them appear more acceptable and empowered to the reader in relieving them from the burden of menstruation and letting them pass more successfully, and limits physical femininity to female-coded heroines, implying that they cannot be properly women while taking on a male role.

In conclusion, fantasy heroines mostly menstruate behind the scenes and when menstrual management is addressed, it is usually either in relation to menarche (for example in *Alanna: The First Adventure*), or to successfully passing as a man

(for example in *The Liveship Traders*). It is subject to anachronism: historically, free bleeding was common in Europe and only wealthy women used protection, but this is not so much the case in fantasy where menstruating women characters wear rags, probably mostly to appease the contemporary tastes. Privacy of menstruation has always been important, but in fantasy fiction it seems to be taken as such a given that it is addressed specifically only when a woman needs to keep the privacy of her body to pass as a man. The more male-coded a heroine, the less likely she is to menstruate, and in releasing tomboys from their periods writers both present them as more acceptable and limit physical femininity to female-coded heroines.

4 Case study: *A Song of Ice and Fire*

4.1 Gender in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

> "I can describe an axe entering a human skull in great explicit detail and no one will blink twice at it. I provide a similar description, just as detailed, of a penis entering a vagina, and I get letters about it and people swearing off."
>
> – George R.R. Martin (Mora)

A Song of Ice and Fire (*ASoIaF*) is George R.R. Martin's fantasy series of five books, with two more yet to come out as of 2017: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1999), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). Although some chapters of the upcoming 6th instalment have been made available, this thesis discusses solely the five published novels. The series has gathered a large fan base partly owing to its on-screen adaptation in HBO's hit show *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*; 2011–). It takes place in a fictional world, mostly the medieval Europe-based Seven Kingdoms on the continent of Westeros, and plot-wise the series focuses on power struggles between the ruling families, drawing inspiration from the Wars of the Roses in 15th-century England (Walker 71-72). Elements of magic and the supernatural are present: there are dragons and direwolves, and a variety of magic and arcane lore. What has set *ASoIaF* apart from much other mainstream fantasy fiction is its gritty realism, in its tendency both to kill off major characters and not to shy away from portraying violence and sex. As the George R.R. Martin quote in the opening of this chapter shows, the former is often easier for the reader to stomach than the latter, but Martin does not stop there: not all

blood in the series comes from violence, but some of it is menstrual, which literature tends to depict explicitly even less than sex.

The gender ratio in *ASoIaF* is somewhat more even than in fantasy fiction in general. The books follow several plotlines through 24 major or minor point of view (POV) characters, narrating each chapter in limited third person from the perspective of the titular character. Almost half of the POV characters are women, several of whom are central protagonists and "potential candidates for the fought-over Iron Throne" (Schubart and Gjelsvik 1). Almost equally, 43% of the chapters are from a female character's point of view (135 out of 311). In an age where most action films feature one token female character, who is more often than not the male protagonist's love interest, it is refreshing to see so many fully fleshed out women in such a wildly popular series. Martin once famously answered an interview question about how he writes women characters so well by quipping: "You know, I've always considered women to be people" ("George R.R. Martin on Strombo"). And indeed, his women characters are people with their individual strengths and weaknesses – and some of them, with their periods.

While marriage and adulthood are the most common contexts in which menstruation is mentioned, there is a great deal of variation, from a casual mention of a girl "t[aking] to her bed with her moon blood" (Martin, *Feast* 726), to men using menstruation as an excuse for sexist harassment (Martin, *Storm* 157-58). Yet despite several female POV characters and menstruation references, *ASoIaF* does not portray menstruation for nearly all of these characters. The only ones who are shown to menstruate in the books are Sansa Stark, Queen Cersei Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen, all of whom are subject to case studies in this chapter. In addition to them, menstruation is mentioned in three other POV characters' story arcs: Catelyn Stark's (in connection to fertility and the absence of menstruation), Asha Greyjoy's (in connection to sexuality), and Brienne of Tarth's (in connection to sexist harassment). This leaves three female point of view characters whose menstruation is not discussed at all: Arya Stark, Arianne Martell, and Melisandre. And although menstruation is mentioned regularly, especially in relation to menarche ("flowering"), and though there are several female viewpoint characters who menstruate, there are few scenes that depict menstruation as it happens. Mostly, like in many other books, it takes place behind the scenes.

The Westeros universe is heavily based on medieval Europe. This also means that sexism runs rampant, and George R.R. Martin has been criticised for writing excessively about sexual violence. As Schubart and Gjelsvik point out:

> *A Song of Ice and Fire* takes place in a world with brothels, rapes, incest, and sexual torture, where girls and women, noble, peasant, and prostitute, are rap[e]able. Abuse and violence are, thus, an integrated part of the sexual politics of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. (8)

Martin himself maintains that his writing is an antithesis to what he calls the "Disneyland in Middle Ages," claiming that if one is to write about war yet exclude sexual violence, "there's something fundamentally dishonest about that" (Hibberd). While *ASoIaF* deals with a great deal of sexual violence, rape is even more prevalent in the HBO show *Game of Thrones*. Reuser questions whether rape and torture in the name of "historical accuracy" really are essential for a literary fantasy narrative to be acceptable to popular culture consumers, and points out that the audience's experience cannot be dismissed (157-58): the "manner in which rape survivors are portrayed in *GoT* … offers a troubling case study for rape culture's prevalence in popular media" (159). The show's decisions regarding the representations of menstruation and rape offer an interesting contrast. The only menstruation portrayal in the show is Sansa Stark's menarche ("A Man Without Honor"), leaving out all the numerous times it is mentioned in the books; and interestingly, the showrunners have added scenes, "altered from Martin's source text" (Reuser 156), where each of the three characters analysed in this thesis – Sansa ("Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken"), Cersei ("Breaker of Chains"), and Daenerys ("Winter is Coming") – are raped. While this choice of characters may be a coincidence and the rape scenes do not replace the menstruation scenes, which are simply omitted, the parallels imply that rape is considered more acceptable to the contemporary viewer than menstruation.

In Martin's universe, menstruation has two significant consequences: being allowed to marry, and having the ability to conceive. Thus, menarche is a sign of adulthood, even if the age of legal majority is sixteen for girls and boys both (Martin, "Age of Sexual Relations"). It also gives girls a certain authority over their pre-menarcheal friends: "Megga was round and loud, Alla shy and pretty, but Elinor ruled the three by right of womanhood; she was a maiden flowered, whereas Megga and Alla were mere girls" (Martin, *Storm* 222). This is similar to Newton's findings regarding girls' actual experiences (91) and to many other menarche narratives:

menstruation equals a higher rank (Evins 51). As Martin confirms online in response to a fan's question, a girl is old enough to wed when she experiences menarche – Daenerys has had her blood and is "old enough for the khal"[17] (Martin, *Game* 34) at the age of 13 – but even so, it is more common to wait till she is 15-16 before having sex; while even a pre-menarcheal girl may be married for political reasons, having sex with her "would be considered perverse" ("Age of Sexual Relations").

Chapter 4.2 analyses Sansa Stark's menarche. She is a character with very little agency, subject to the patriarchy, and the beginning of her menstruation reflects this.

Chapter 4.3 provides a reading of Queen Cersei Lannister's incestuous menstrual sex scene. It shows her to be a transgressive and indulgent character, and highlights society's double standard for men and women in that its implications for her brother Jaime are much more positive.

Chapter 4.4 explores how Daenerys Targaryen's menstruation contributes to her transcendence over the Triple Goddess archetype and leads her to find her purpose.

4.2 *ASoIaF* Case Study 1: Sansa Stark – Menarche and the Patriarchy

Sansa Stark's menarche is deeply intertwined with her inferior status within the patriarchal court. It is the longest menstruation narrative in the whole *ASoIaF*, and her menstruation starts in a way that epitomises and exaggerates the menarche narratives discussed in chapter 3.2: her fright and subsequent reaction present menarche as a cataclysmic upheaval, but when she later expresses her feelings about it, she purposefully chooses to portray it as anticlimactic. Menarche scares her because she knows that her forced marriage can take place, and its onset is also connected to the crumbling of her girlish ideas – girlish in this case meaning both childish, and connected to her gender-specific expectations regarding, for example, marriage – in favour of the view that the world is not good for a woman.

Sansa's menstruation begins when she is alone in a hostile court, her family and friends dead, gone, or missing. She is aged 12, and despite her family falling into dishonour, her betrothal to the sadistic Prince Joffrey Baratheon stands. Joffrey's Lannister family eagerly wait for her flowering, which will legally allow her to marry Joffrey, and Sansa herself dreads it for this very reason. Menstruation brings

[17] Chieftain of a tribe of *Dothraki* nomads.

about very gendered expectations (Rosewarne 56), and in Sansa's case this means marriage. Joffrey is a sadist whom she does not want to marry but she has no choice, and thus it is not surprising that she so grossly overreacts when her menstruation eventually starts towards the end of *A Clash of Kings* in a scene that succeeds at being both cataclysmic and anticlimactic at the same time.

There are two options a fantasy heroine can generally choose from: adopt a male role, or accept her objectification under the male gaze (Milon 47), the former being interpreted more positively as the latter (Milon 52). Sansa is a very feminine character with little agency. Having internalised the male gaze, she has also internalised the idea that other women are her competitors and do not mean her well – when Arya's direwolf attacked Prince Joffrey and ran away, souring the relationship between him and Sansa, Queen Cersei insisted that Sansa's direwolf Lady be put to death instead (Martin, *Game* 157). Sansa's distrust in other women is reflected in the threatening and violent dream she has before her period starts:

> That night Sansa dreamed of the riot again. … Women swarmed over her like weasels, pinching her legs and kicking her in the belly, and someone hit her in the face and she felt her teeth shatter. Then she saw the bright glimmer of steel. The knife plunged into her belly and tore and tore and tore, until there was nothing left of her down there but shiny wet ribbons. (Martin, *Clash* 757-58)

While the dream is based on real events in Sansa's life, the details have changed. The dream incorporates elements of blood and pain, centring on Sansa's belly, and is obviously connected to Sansa's menarche. As women swarm over her, she is violently hit with the reality of womanhood; namely, she is now at the mercy of her body, in a patriarchal society which sets women against each other. They cause her pain in the stomach and legs, mimicking menstrual cramps, and when she is hit in the face, we presume she tastes blood. Eventually a phallic knife enters her stomach, tearing her to pieces and upending her physical reality, to replace it with a new physical existence of shiny wet ribbons where her integrity and bodily autonomy are under attack. The mere occurrence of menarche has broken Sansa even if her conscious mind does not yet know of it. Much of her subsequent reaction can be traced back to what King Joffrey told her while forcing her to look at her executed father's head mounted on a spike:

> "I'll get you with child as soon as you're able. … If the first one is stupid, I'll chop off your head and find a smarter wife. When do you think you'll be able to have children?" (Martin, *Game* 747).

Sansa knows that she will essentially become a breeding mare, and her life may depend on how she performs: the phallic knife of her dream will literally tear her into shiny wet ribbons. With the onset of her menstruation, she can no longer avoid her fate and must step out of the limbo in which she has been so far.

Menarche narratives are the most common type of menstruation portrayals (Rosewarne 124). According to Delaney et al., the motifs introduced in the earliest fictional treatments of menarche, namely Edmond de Goncourt's *Chérie* and Emile Zola's *La Joie de Vivre*, dating back to France in 1884 (171), "continue in later literature about the menarche: the girl's ignorance and fear, the timidity or refusal of other women to tell her what is happening to her, and the stained sheets, the palpable sign that she has entered the realm of womanhood" (173). They all paint menstruation as something negative and shameful, and all are present in the scene of Sansa's menarche:

> When she threw back the blanket and saw the blood, all she could think was that her dream had somehow come true. She remembered the knives inside her, twisting and ripping. She squirmed away in horror, kicking at the sheets and falling to the floor, breathing raggedly, naked, bloodied, and afraid.
>
> But as she crouched there, on her hands and knees, understanding came. (Martin, *Clash* 758)

Even though Sansa eventually understands what is happening to her, she is so terrified that her mind first rejects it. Her fear makes her a pitiful figure, crouching naked on the floor and bleeding uncontrollably. The literary choice to emphasise ignorance and fear is so long-standing it has become the norm, and as such it is harmful: it sets the scene for menarche, automatically associating it with negative feelings. When menarche is described like this by a (cis) male writer, it inevitably comes across as patronising: when a writer exerts his patriarchal authority over a vulnerable young female character, he does not only subject his own fictional character to menstrual shame, but perpetuates it for every girl.

In popular discourse, menstruation is often likened to madness in a patriarchal attempt to justify misogyny (Grosz 13-14). Whereas many menarche narratives focus on a girl's ignorance and fear, Sansa's takes the latter to a new level compared to the other adolescent girls discussed in this thesis. When she wakes up, sees the blood on her thighs and realises what is happening, "madness [takes] hold of her" (Martin, *Clash* 758):

> Snatching up her knife, Sansa hacked at the sheet, cutting out the stain. *If they ask me about the hole, what will I say?* Tears ran down her face. She pulled the torn sheet from the bed, and the stained blanket as well. *I'll have to burn them.* She balled up the evidence, stuffed it in the fireplace, drenched it in oil from her bedside lamp, and lit it afire. Then she realized that the blood had soaked through the sheet into the featherbed, so she bundled that up as well, but it was big and cumbersome, hard to move. Sansa could get only half of it into the fire. She was on her knees, struggling to shove the mattress into the flames as thick grey smoke eddied around her and filled the room, when the door burst open and she heard her maid gasp. (Martin, *Clash* 758)

Sansa's reaction can be read as part of the continuum where she is a naïve and romantic girl with her head full of tales, ignorant of reality and easily shaken by unfamiliar things. She is also ashamed; she finds her menstruation and the stains it has leaked so shameful that she rather goes to extremes than admits her failure in being caught unprepared, both physically and mentally. There is also the underlying reason, namely, her panic about having to marry Joffrey, but this is not what primarily comes across to the reader. As Gresham points out, the "appearance of blood is presented not only as violent and vile but also as a betrayal of the girl's safe status by the advent of uncontrollable femininity represented as a rampage of violence" (155). However, the scene contributes to a reading of Sansa as a helpless and overly emotional little girl, unable to control her surroundings. It presents menstruation as something that will make women act irrationally and violently, being ultimately a very negative representation of menstruation.

It becomes obvious as the scene goes on that, as discussed above in reference to Delaney et al. (171), Sansa also faces the timidity and refusal of other women to explain to her what is happening. Never mind that she is surrounded by women: her maid finds her and gasps, and after a vague group of "three of them," presumably women given the context, have pulled her away from the singed mattress, "women came and went, muttering and looking at her strangely" (Martin, *Clash* 759). They "bathed her and washed her hair[18] and gave her a cloth to wear between her legs" (Martin, *Clash* 759), but not one person explains anything to her. The mundane explanation for this is that she has scared them by trying to burn her room or that the servants do not deem it appropriate to meddle in the affairs of their "betters"; rather than that they are afraid of her flowering. Nevertheless, the fact stands that as discussed by Delaney et al. (171), they seem timid as they refuse to tell Sansa what is

[18] Interestingly, bathing or washing one's hair during menstruation has been a source of superstition in Europe, and was thought to be physically damaging. These beliefs have persisted until the late 20th century. (Newton 119-20).

happening to her, and their strange muttering can be interpreted as a sign of disgust at Sansa's state. Their reluctance highlights the notion of menstruation as so shameful that it cannot even be discussed between women. The male-dominated society has estranged women from their bodies, or at the very least, from considering their bodily functions normal, and the serving women are punishing Sansa for not taking care of her body with no commotion.

Despite the problematic trope of women's refusal to enlighten a menarcheal character, menstruation has potential to connect women. Lauren Rosewarne writes that menstruation can facilitate bonding between women (16) and adds that there is an undercurrent in most menstruation narratives: "periods are *women's* business, … there is something intrinsically feminine about them, and … a *normal* menarche experience will involve a girl's mother" (19). But Sansa's mother is not present. In this scene, Queen Cersei Lannister fulfils the role of Catelyn Stark; ironic, given that Catelyn is later murdered with the Lannisters' blessing. Cersei explains menarche to Sansa very nonchalantly: "The blood is the seal of your womanhood. Lady Catelyn might have prepared you. You've had your first flowering, no more" (Martin, *Clash* 759). This is a rare moment of truce between the two characters: Cersei has little appreciation for Sansa and does not hide her contempt, while in turn Sansa is afraid of the queen. However, here the two women – for Sansa is a woman now – discuss matters on a more equal and friendly footing than usually. During this momentary ceasefire, Cersei even tells Sansa about her first childbirth and provides her with some invaluable and very pessimistic advice: "'Sansa, permit me to share a bit of womanly wisdom with you on this very special day. Love is poison. A sweet poison, yes, but it will kill you all the same'" (761). After the morning, they resume their distant relations, but Sansa's flowering has been enough to bring them close, even if for an hour. It has also been a step towards her maturity: she excuses her reckless behaviour by telling Queen Cersei: "'My lady mother told me [about flowering], but I... I thought it would be different'" (Martin, *Clash* 759), essentially hiding that her fear was caused first and foremost by the prospect of marrying Joffrey, something that she – who has been taught that a lady's armour is courtesy (Martin, *Clash* 50) – could never admit to the queen.

Most of Sansa's panic is channelled at the bloody sheets, and destroying them before anyone sees them is her priority. They bring her both terror and shame: "She rushed back to the bed and stared in horror at the dark red stain and the tale it told.

All she could think was that she had to get rid of it, or else they'd see" (Martin, *Clash* 758). Her horror is partly caused by her failure in hiding her menstruation which, as Newton writes, is supposed to be contained within the female body (167). The appearance of blood also shows that "Sansa cannot control her own circumstances, is without borders, cannot be rationally contained" (Gresham 155). Her body has begun to leak, and her inability to do anything about the bloody stains reinforces the idea of her as "a fundamentally passive character with virtually no control over her own destiny" (Napolitano 42). In her menarche, the narrative punishes her for not adopting a male role.

Marc Napolitano stresses that Sansa is a character who cannot control her circumstances: "From her betrothal to Joffrey, to her mistreatment at the hands of the Lannisters, to her forced marriage to Tyrion, to her abduction by Littlefinger, the course of Sansa's story arc is shaped by those around her" (42), mostly men. This is also true for her menarche: its advent coincides with her disillusioned conversation with Sandor Clegane, colloquially known as the Hound. Even though Sansa is terrified of the Hound, he is one of the most constant and important figures in her life in court. He is a foil to Sansa's dreams of romance and chivalry, and delights in breaking her illusions. As Leederman points out, *ASoIaF* has a compelling habit of depicting "chivalric and romantic ideals as catastrophic failures, riddled with the same hubris and corruption as contemporary society, in a fashion that rings with the knell of unavoidable human truth" (189), and nowhere is it more evident than in the character of the Hound who despises ideas of knighthood and chivalry in stark contrast to Sansa's childhood notions.

The Hound is a catalyst to Sansa's menarche by questioning her ideals and thus hurrying her to mature. Contradictorily, he is protecting her at the same time, reflecting the patriarchal attitude that even when men treat women badly, women need them. The evening before Sansa's menstruation starts, the Hound saves her when she almost falls off the palace roof: "A stab went through her, so sharp that Sansa sobbed and clutched at her belly. She might have fallen but a shadow moved suddenly, and strong fingers grabbed her arm and steadied her" (Martin, *Clash* 754). The stab is a reference both to her approaching menarche and period pain, and to the scales of childish ideals slowly falling from her eyes. This is not the first time he Hound saves her. During the riot that Sansa dreamed of, quoted earlier in this chapter, the Hound is the one who comes for her when she is pulled off her horse.

But in her dream, he is not there and nobody comes to her rescue. No matter how hard she tries to convince herself that there are true knights and at least some of the stories that she heard as a child are true, she is gradually starting to take in what the Hound tells her – and this is traumatic enough to onset her period.

Sansa's gradual disillusionment is evident in the conversation she has with the Hound on the palace roof. She gently tries to impose her ideals of valour and chivalry on him, and he outright rejects them and mocks her in return:

> Sansa backed away from him. "You're awful."
>
> "I'm honest. It's the world that's awful. Now fly away, little bird, I'm sick of hearing you peeping at me."
>
> Wordless, she fled. She was afraid of Sandor Clegane… and yet, some part of her wished that Ser Dontos had a little of the Hound's ferocity. *There are gods*, she told herself, *and there are true knights too. All the stories can't be lies*. (Martin, *Clash* 757)

In this scene, Sansa flees because her change of mind is too much to face. She tries to remind herself of the stories she has grown up with, but it takes conscious effort. Instead, she is starting to see the attraction of what the Hound tells her. As Gresham points out, Sansa "rejects fairytale illusions about knights and chivalry, which are most notably destroyed for her through her exposure to Joffrey's cruelties, as she matures and is forced to take responsibility for her own survival" (167). She understands that her role as the "little bird" is to peep what people in power – mostly men – tell her, and she has no other agency. Her disillusionment is clear when she later recounts to Queen Cersei what made her act irresponsibly after waking up to her menstruation: "'The blood frightened me. … I thought it would be different. … Less… less messy, and more magical'" (Martin, *Clash* 759). The world is no longer a clear and magical place to her, and this is in part thanks to the Hound. Interestingly, the Hound runs away from the court before Sansa's first period is over. Caught in her disillusionment and fear, she refuses his offer to protect her and is thus fully thrown at the mercy of the Lannisters: all that he leaves behind to her is his white Kingsguard cloak, soiled in blood in parallel to Sansa's own menstruation (Martin, *Clash* 867).

The Hound is not the only man connected to Sansa's menstruation. Before it starts, it is keenly expected – most of all by men. Ostensibly, the reason men keep asking her about her menstrual status is their interest in knowing when she can

marry. However, their questions can easily read as sexism, in a manner similar to male writers' glee at portraying a menarcheal girl's helplessness. They are putting the little, lonely girl in her place by reminding her of her inferior status as a female. Men's attitudes towards menstruation in *ASoIaF* seem similar to those in the real world. According to Rosewarne, men are considered more masculine, the less they know of, or have interest in, menstruation:

> The feminine nature of menstruation … may discourage men from taking too much of an interest, fearing that too much understanding may somehow link them too closely to women, too closely to femininity, and thus emasculate them, or alternatively, render them perverted. (28)

It is obvious that the men who discuss menstruation are transgressing, choosing to risk being seen as perverted to further their own agenda. Three men bring up Sansa's flowering in the series: King Joffrey Baratheon, to whom Sansa is engaged; Tyrion Lannister, whom Sansa is forced to marry in *A Storm of Swords*; and Tywin Lannister, father and patriarch of House Lannister. The tone of these discussions makes it clear that menstruation is not something commonly discussed by, or with, men.

The first instance is as early as *A Game of Thrones* when Sansa is 11-12. Sansa's reaction makes it clear that Joffrey is acting out of bounds:

> "I'll get you with child as soon as you're able," Joffrey said as he escorted her across the practice yard. "If the first one is stupid, I'll chop off your head and find a smarter wife. When do you think you'll be able to have children?"
>
> Sansa could not look at him, he shamed her so. "Septa Mordane says most… most highborn girls have their flowering at twelve or thirteen." (Martin, *Game* 747)

Joffrey takes pleasure in tormenting Sansa, and by the time of this scene, she is alone and there is no one left to defend her. For Joffrey, inquiring about her fertility is a form of control: he is showing her that she is under his power, to do with what he likes, and he holds both her life and her future children hostage. Sansa's shame is palpable: she cannot look at him and stammers when answering his question, but she does not have a choice. Joffrey is also showing Sansa her place as a woman and shaming her for her bodily functions. Having been crowned king, he need not worry about being thought perverted for talking about menstruation, for Sansa is his subject and the question is a way for him to establish that he can do what he pleases with her. Joffrey transgresses because he can, but most of all to shame Sansa.

Inquiring after menstruation reinforces the idea that a woman's body is not her property. In *A Clash of Kings*, Tyrion Lannister, serving as the Hand (main counsellor) of King Joffrey, intends to prevent Sansa's marriage to Joffrey, and while talking to her about it, he asks: "'You *are* a child still, are you not? Or have you flowered?'" (Martin, *Clash* 492). Because this happens in Sansa's POV chapter (before her menarche), we get an insight into her thoughts: "Sansa blushed. It was a rude question, but the shame of being stripped before half the castle made it seem like nothing" (Martin, *Clash* 492). The incident in Sansa's mind occurred just a moment ago: King Joffrey had his knights strip and beat Sansa in front of the court as a punishment for her brother's rebellion, and only Tyrion's arrival saved her from further abuse (Martin, *Clash* 488). She contends that the question feels like nothing compared to what she just went through, but even so she acknowledges that it is rude, so much so that it makes her blush. This shows that it is not trivial for a man to discuss a woman's menstruation, least of all inquire after it. Tyrion is portrayed as a considerably more good-hearted character than his other prominent family members, and his motives are seemingly innocent because the marriage that he tries to stop cannot take place before Sansa's menarche. But he is still crossing boundaries, both hers and societal. Sansa's body, like any high-born female body, is subject to the patriarchal crown, and the crown's concerns are above judgment.

Even when a man takes interest in a girl's menstruation, there are ways around explicit transgression. In *A Storm of Swords*, Tywin Lannister arranges for Sansa and Tyrion to marry. The marriage is against the wishes of both parties: Sansa finds repulsive both Tyrion himself and the idea of marrying a Lannister, while Tyrion is in love with another woman and thinks – rightly – that Sansa is a child. He tries to sway Tywin by protesting at her youth:

> "She is no more than a child."
>
> "Your sister swears she's flowered. If so, she is a woman, fit to be wed. You must needs take her maidenhead, so no man can say the marriage was not consummated. After that, if you prefer to wait a year or two before bedding her again, you would be within your rights as a husband." (Martin, *Storm* 268)

Tywin manages to avoid appearing interested in Sansa's menstrual status: he does not state her flowering as a simple fact, but by quoting Queen Cersei instead. By beginning his second sentence conditionally with "If so," he makes it clear that he neither knows nor wants to know, instead laying the burden of proof on Cersei.

Tywin makes it clear that menstruation is his business only as far as it concerns his immediate family, and the Queen's word is all he has because there is no way to verify Sansa's flowering for himself. Having replaced Tyrion as the Hand of the King, Tywin is allowed to discuss transgressive matters when they are in the interests of the crown, but he simultaneously steers clear from appearing interested, and therefore feminine or perverted. Yet he uses his power – as a high-ranking noble, as advisor to the king, and as a man – to define when a woman is grown. Sansa is not present during the conversation, and the scene is sadly reminiscent of the long tradition of men making decisions about women's bodies behind closed doors.

Compared to Joffrey and Tyrion's questioning, Sansa's reaction is markedly different when a woman – in this case, her aunt Lysa Arryn, Lady of the Eyrie – asks her whether she has started menstruating:

> "You *are* a woman flowered, are you not?"
>
> "Yes." Sansa knew the truth of her flowering could not be long hidden in the Eyrie. (Martin, *Storm* 943)

Gone is the shame of having to disclose her menstrual status to a man, and Sansa simply admits it. It is possible to read her reaction as different because now she *has* in fact flowered, and as mentioned in chapter 4.1, it gives a girl a degree of authority and marks her as a woman. But most likely the main reason for her different reaction is that she is talking to a woman who has herself gone through the same. Sansa may not be entirely comfortable discussing her menstruation, only admitting it because she knows it cannot be hidden, but she does not hesitate to answer truthfully and the question does not cause her shame. The difference in her reaction is remarkable, and supports the argument that Sansa is not embarrassed to discuss her period per se, only to discuss it with a man.

Sansa's menarche is awkward even by the menarche scene standards discussed in chapter 3.2. Her fear and ignorance are blown out of proportion, and as her body starts to leak and stain her surroundings, her menarche is shown as an uncontrollable rampage of violent femininity, proving right misogynist claims about women's unpredictability. The scene focuses on the shame of womanhood: both Sansa's intrinsic shame of her flowering and failing to hide it; and the shame caused by the women's strange mutterings and reluctance to talk to her, the patriarchal society pitting women against each other. Sansa's menarche is presented as

cataclysmic and anticlimactic at the same time: it has changed everything, but is not at all what Sansa expected. The underlying reason for Sansa's fear is the idea of having to marry Joffrey, but this does not negate her portrayal as a naïve and ignorant girl, a punishment for adopting a traditionally feminine role.

Sansa's menstruation is connected to the patriarchy throughout. Its onset is brought about by her disillusionment and gradual realisation that her options in the male-dominated world are limited, to which the Hound has contributed. It starts with a dream of a phallic knife plunging into her, illustrating how her body does not belong to herself but to Joffrey and the patriarchal crown. In showing interest in her menstruation, men claim authority over Sansa's body time and again: Joffrey focuses on shaming and scaring her, Tyrion transgresses because it is his duty, and while skilfully navigating around transgression, Tywin uses his authority to judge Sansa a woman grown. As Gresham points out, the problematic way that Sansa's menstruation is presented "highlights how Martin does not treat women uniformly" (155-56). Just as male characters exert their power over a woman's body, so do the male writers who choose to portray menarche problematically as a source of shame and fear.

4.3 *ASoIaF* Case Study 2: Cersei Lannister – the Queen of Broken Taboos

Menstrual sex is a rarity in fictional narratives: Rosewarne argues that while many other menstrual taboos have waned, the taboo against menstrual sex is alive and well and "continue[s] to inform and impact on a woman's inclination to have sex" (77). As discussed in chapter 3.4, menstruation can stop sex from happening either because men find it disgusting, or because a woman uses it as an excuse to avoid sex. Scenes where sex takes place during menstruation are scarce, but in *A Storm of Swords* (2000), George R.R. Martin delivers an explicit menstrual sex narrative. It is transgressive in several ways: Queen Cersei Lannister has incestuous menstrual sex with her twin brother Jaime in a house of worship over their dead son's body. The scene normalises menstrual sex but highlights Cersei as an indulgent and transgressive character who thinks she is above social norms. It has different implications for the two characters, and it can be read to support the argument that men and women are judged differently solely based on their gender when they

engage in the same act. The reunion is also a turning point in their relationship, and Cersei's menstruation further underlines the taboo quality of their incestuous affair.

Cersei presents the reader with an interesting dichotomy by combining male and female-coded traits. She considers her ambition masculine yet uses her femininity and sexuality to achieve her goals, trying to employ the intrinsic misogyny of society to her advantage but being time and again thwarted by it. Her twin brother Jaime, with whom she has had an incestuous relationship since their youth, is her foil – while otherwise identical, their treatment has always been different because of their genders, making Cersei aware of the patriarchal structure of society and leading her to believe that her shortcomings are caused by other people's disregard for women. She is comfortable in her body and, as the scene discussed here shows, with her menstruation: unlike Sansa who does all within her power to hide her menstruation from the rest of the world, Cersei does not balk at having her menstrual blood stain an altar during sex. In the end, she is a victim of the patriarchal society, but unlike Sansa whose agency is limited because of her gender, Cersei embraces the conditioning society has put on her: by using her feminine wiles to try to reach her goals, she tries to play the patriarchy and fails.

The menstrual sex scene takes place in Jaime's POV chapter after he and Cersei have been away from each other for a book and a half. The separation has changed Jaime more than Cersei, and he wants to move on with his life – whether with Cersei or without her remains yet to be seen. He is not entirely comfortable with her when they finally meet: he breaks from their embrace when Cersei asks why he did not come sooner; pulls away, feeling sickened, when she asks him to kill their brother Tyrion for her; and eventually returns her kiss with "no tenderness … only hunger" (Martin, *Storm* 850-51). To him, their relationship has changed, and he is no longer content with secret trysts and lies. On the other hand, Cersei's reason for initially resisting Jaime's advances is the fear of being found out: when he starts kissing her neck, she protests: "'No … not here. The septons…'"[19] (Martin, *Storm* 851). Meanwhile, Jaime disregards Cersei's protests: not concerned about anything at all, he admits that he wants to stop hiding and marry his sister like the Targaryen dynasty used to do (Martin, *Storm* 852). This highlights Cersei's reactionaryism in contrast to Jaime: he, having travelled and experienced new things, is willing to

[19] Clergy.

come clean with their incestuous relationship whereas she, having stayed in her regular life at court, remains secretive.

What sets the scene apart from the average romantic reunion is that Cersei happens to be menstruating, which Jaime discovers when he starts undressing her:

> He undid his breeches and pushed her bare white legs apart. One hand slid up her thigh and underneath her smallclothes. When he tore them away, he saw that her moon's blood was on her, but it made no difference. (Martin, *Storm* 851)

Contrary to what one might expect given that men are generally portrayed as less comfortable with menstruation than women, it is usually women who are the sexual gatekeepers, dictating abstinence from menstrual sex, while "men are rarely shown to deem menstrual blood as a barrier" (Rosewarne 82). However, neither Cersei nor Jaime considers her menstruation a hindrance – in fact, Cersei does not even find it necessary to mention it to him beforehand, implying that menstrual sex has been part of their reality before and incest is not the only taboo they have broken. On the contrary, she urges him on: "'Hurry,' she was whispering now, 'quickly, *quickl*y, now, do it now, do me now'" (Martin, *Storm* 851). When an abundance of narratives presents a woman as feeling squeamish about menstrual sex while a man would happily go along with it, it implies that women who engage in it are promiscuous. This view applies to Cersei: that neither menstruation nor the loss of her son can keep her from having sex makes her come across as crassly indulgent. The implications of menstrual sex are different for men. Having sex with a menstruating woman can be an accomplishment that strengthens a man's masculinity,[20] or it can read as a sign of devotion which "presents love, passion, and obsession as far stronger emotions than squeamishness" (Rosewarne 134). For Jaime, it is the latter, as he acknowledges that Cersei's menstrual blood is just part of the sex: "Jaime lost himself in her flesh. He could feel Cersei's heart beating in time with his own, and the wetness of blood and seed where they were joined" (Martin, *Storm* 851-52). By focusing on Jaime's heart beating in time with Cersei's, the scene underlines that his love for her is far stronger than any potential aversion to menstrual blood.

The growing gap between Cersei and Jaime becomes evident by their subsequent reactions to the sex. Rosewarne identifies menstrual sex as "a manifestation of non-vanilla sexual practices … and engaged in by people who are

[20] The Hell's Angels reputedly award a badge of accomplishment to men who perform cunnilingus on a menstruating woman (Thompson 109).

socially non-conforming" (136). In Cersei and Jaime's case this is hardly news given that the taboo against incest is stronger than any menstrual taboo. Their scene of incestuous menstrual sex in a sept reminds the reader of just how twisted their relationship has been, and sets up a contrast with what happens after it. Jaime, changed by their separation, asks Cersei to marry him, which she flatly refuses, drawing back: "'That's not funny. … *Don't*… don't talk like this. You're scaring me, Jaime. Don't be *stupid*'" (Martin, *Storm* 852). Again, Jaime's proposition reflects a reading of menstrual sex as a demonstration of man's true devotion. The scene highlights Jaime's love and passion for Cersei and his desire for normalcy and recognition while reinforcing an image of Cersei, who rejects him without stopping to consider it, as an indulgent, evil queen, happily bound both to secrecy and by the taboos she breaks: it is, after all, she who made the first move by kissing Jaime (Martin, *Storm* 851), allowing him to have non-conforming sex with her despite being on her period, and only regrets it when Jaime starts speaking of marriage. Even when she initially tried to refuse his advances, nothing in her reasoning concerned her menstruation, implying that breaking the taboo is not a problem for her. All in all, the menstrual sex in Cersei and Jaime's reunion reads differently for the two: to Jaime, it signals love; to Cersei, indulgence.

Ironically, the altar on which Jaime lifts Cersei to have sex with her is hallowed to the Mother, one of the seven gods. Despite being a doting mother, Cersei is concerned about "the risk, the danger, about their father, about the septons, about the wrath of gods" (Martin, *Storm* 851), but not about their son's body lying on a nearby bier. When Jaime feels the blood and seed come together (Martin, *Storm* 852), it is worth noting that in medieval Europe, "menstrual blood was held to be the 'matter' to which semen supplied 'form,' creating the fetus" (Buckley and Gottlieb 38). Thus, despite taking place next to their firstborn's bier, and although Cersei presumably does not conceive, the scene evokes twisted imagery of hope, in the form of a highly stigmatised intercourse on the Mother's altar. The late King Joffrey's presence in the scene is appropriate: throughout history, there have been various misconceptions about the effects of menstrual sex, and a popular 17th century medical work taught that "conception during menstruation would result in birth abnormalities and was very dangerous" (Newton 29). It is possible to draw a link to Joffrey who, while able-bodied, must have suffered from a personality disorder,

possibly caused by his incestuous origin. His sadism, which ultimately led to his demise, can be read as Cersei and Jaime's punishment for breaking taboos.

While blood is not a disgusting substance per se and is shown in many other contexts, adding the prefix "menstrual" before it is enough to make it so. However, true to his realistic habit, George R.R. Martin also addresses the aftermath of menstrual sex. In a rare scene, menstrual blood is actually described:

> Reluctantly he rolled away and helped her off the altar. The pale marble was smeared with blood. Jaime wiped it clean with his sleeve, then bent to pick up the candles he had knocked over. (Martin, *Storm* 852)

Despite blood being "the most obvious example of what is considered disgusting about menstruation," it is rare for menstrual blood to appear in a narrative, and "in lieu of blood, disgust is often directed at aspects of menstruation" (Rosewarne 102). The brief scene where Jaime wipes Cersei's menstrual blood off the altar is, surprisingly, a positive portrayal: it normalises menstrual blood, presenting it as a normal substance that a man can touch, even when not in the throes of passion, without making a fuss. Yet the positivity of the portrayal is more related to Jaime than Cersei: she is a character who acts without thinking of the consequences, while Jaime carefully cleans up after her.

The menstrual sex scene between Cersei and Jaime goes to emphasise how menstrual sex reads differently for men and women. To Jaime, menstrual sex constitutes a symbol of love and dedication, whereas with Cersei, it highlights her promiscuity. It also shows how Jaime has changed, growing apart from Cersei: he is no longer happy in secrecy, while Cersei indulges in forbidden sexuality and breaking taboos. Their menstrual sex is evidence of their nonconformity, just one bead in the string of taboos they have broken, which includes incest. That the scene takes place on the Mother's altar beside their dead son's bier is telling: it connects Joffrey's death to their vices, and shows Cersei as a failed mother, subjecting her motherhood to her transgressions. However, the scene also normalises menstrual sex: Jaime is not put off by it, and when Cersei's menstrual blood stains the altar, he wipes it off without further ado.

4.4 *ASoIaF* Case Study 3: Daenerys Targaryen – Rebirth in Fire and Blood

The most transcendental menstruation portrayal that George R.R. Martin presents is without a doubt that of Daenerys Targaryen. Her menstruation is a key part of a narrative that is essentially her rebirth and transcendence over the Maiden, Mother and Crone phases of the Triple Goddess archetype. She moves beyond all stigma, appearing as "the embodiment of life" in a liminal state that "embrace[s] in combining imagery from the empowering aspects of the feminine, masculine, and bestial" (Gresham 151). The representation of her menstruation differs from Sansa and Cersei: it is neither a limitation placed on her both by society and herself, nor a symbol of transgression. Instead, it helps her re-establish her connection to her roots and thus to her dragons, and to find her purpose.

Apart from an early reference to her menarche, mentioned in chapter 4.1, Daenerys only menstruates once during the series: in her final chapter in *A Dance with Dragons* when she wakes up one morning, alone in the Dothraki grasslands, and finds her thighs "slick with blood" (Martin, *Dance* 1029). Some readers have questioned whether Daenerys is menstruating or miscarrying, and although the arguments for the latter are valid enough,[21] I will treat the scene as a portrayal of menstruation because that is what Daenerys herself thinks and how it is presented to the reader. In any case, early miscarriages are often mistaken for menstruation even today and it never occurs to Daenerys to question that it is anything but her "moon blood."

Daenerys's menstruation reminds her of her initial purpose of taking back her ancestral throne that she has ignored while ruling the slaver city of Meereen. Her change of heart is evident when speaking aloud in her fever-induced madness, she tells the grass around her that she is the blood of the dragon (Martin, *Dance* 1029): the dragon is the sigil of House Targaryen, and her family used to refer to themselves as dragons. It is not the first time Daenerys thinks of herself in these terms, but stressing that she is the blood of the dragon *while* menstruating strengthens her connection to her roots. Like her menarche that marked her a woman and as "old

[21] A few months previously, Daenerys took a male lover for the first time since her husband's death. She cannot remember the last time she had her period (Martin, *Dance* 1029). The day before she starts bleeding, she eats unfamiliar berries which upset her stomach with cramps and diarrhoea and make her retch up green slime (Martin, *Dance* 1027). Her flow also seems heavier to her than usual (Martin, *Dance* 1030).

enough for the khal" (Martin, *Game* 34), her blood "is connected to both her rich ancestry and ability to continue, and perhaps re-envision through a previously marginalized perspective, that rich, ancestral line" (Gresham 156). Menstruating also helps her to follow the advice of Quaithe, a cryptical past acquaintance who appeared to her in a vision a few pages earlier: "'Remember who you are, Daenerys … The dragons know. Do you?'" (Martin, *Dance* 1026). As Gresham points out, "[h]idden behind a red mask that suggests powerful regenerative menstrual blood, Quaithe is a frightening vision of female strength" (165), and it is fitting that she appears to link Daenerys's menstruation both to her dragons and her ancestry. Quaithe is not the only vision that reminds Daenerys of her roots – "the blood of the dragon" is repeated in a hallucination of her erstwhile captain ser[22] Jorah Mormont:

> *Remember that. Remember who you are, what you were made to be. Remember your words.*
> "Fire and Blood," Daenerys told the swaying grass. (Dance 1031)

The words of House Targaryen – *Fire and Blood* – are not just an abstract phrase, but physically present in the chapter: blood, obviously, in Daenerys's menstruation; fire in the form of Drogon, her favourite dragon, who is only visible as a trail of smoke in the horizon until Daenerys remembers who she is and what her purpose is. It is only then that Drogon finally obeys her call.

Daenerys's rebirth is evident in the chapter, subconsciously also to herself. When Drogon flies Daenerys away from Meereen, he takes her to a stony hill where he has made his home and which she takes to calling Dragonstone after the "ancient citadel where she'd been born" (Martin, *Dance* 1018). Gresham writes of the significance of the name: "Connecting this barren spot to her own beginnings, Dany identifies Drogon and her current state with a key aspect of her identity and prepares to begin the most crucial phase of her development, the potential final rise to power" (165). While Daenerys was rushed away from the original Dragonstone before King Robert's men made it there to kill her, she chooses to leave the second Dragonstone of her own volition because she understands that she cannot survive there.

The one defining element in Daenerys's storyline has been straying from her path, and it is while menstruating that she finds her way again. Daenerys initially wanted to take back her "birthright" the Seven Kingdoms, yet after Khal Drogo's

[22] *Ser* is Martin's equivalent of *sir*.

death she turned aside and conquered three slaver cities instead, making her home in Meereen. While doing this, she lost her way: the Mother of Dragons locked up her dragons after Drogon killed a child, and the concerns of ruling Meereen always felt foreign to her, as illustrated by her discomfort in sitting on the throne (*Dance* 49). Her disconnection from herself and her purpose is visible also in that when her menstruation starts, she does not initially realise what is happening, nor does she remember when she last bled:

> *The moon is still a crescent, though. How can that be?* She tried to remember the last time she had bled. The last full moon? The one before? The one before that? *No, it cannot have been so long as that.* (*Dance* 1029)

Just as she has lost her connection to her dragons, she has lost the connection to her body and therefore to the *Fire and Blood* of her ancestry. The quote implies that Daenerys has not been paying attention to her menstrual cycle in months, which is odd especially given how her mind wanders during the long hours that she sits in her throne room in Meereen. Such disregard for a regular bodily function reinforces the image of menstruation as a force of nature, a crimson tide that simply happens on an unsuspecting woman; it makes the woman appear a passive object of menstruation, rather than the menstruating subject. When losing her way, Daenerys has also lost her agency, and it is only when she reconnects both to her fire and her blood that she gets it back. Besides the words of her house, there are two phrases that have followed her from early on and guided her actions: "If I look back I'm lost," and "To go forward you must go back." During her solitary trek in the wilderness of the Dothraki grasslands, she both looks and goes back: essentially, she is lost but going forward. This action completes her circle and gives meaning to the two sentences. Ultimately, Daenerys experiences a rebirth in the wilderness, and her bleeding and sickness contribute to this.

In the context of the final chapter of *A Dance with Dragons*, it is significant that Daenerys follows a stream when she leaves Dragonstone. Gresham points out that moving water is a "symbol of life and progression" that "reminds her of her original pursuit of the Iron Throne" (165), but it also reads as a symbol for menstruation: it flows downhill "[in parallel] of the fluid running down her thighs" (Gresham 166-67). The stream is present from the beginning of the chapter, and for the three days that she walks along it, she thinks it will take her home to Meereen:

> *A stream* … Small, but it would lead her to a larger stream, and that stream would flow into some little river, and all the rivers in this part of the world were vassals of the Skahazadhan. Once she found the Skahazadhan she need only follow it downstream to Slaver's Bay. (Martin, *Dance* 1018)

Gresham sees the stream as cleansing and rejuvenating and suggests that Daenerys "pursues a course, characterized by earthly degradation, which leads her to physical, intellectual, and emotional clarity" (165). Menstruation is part of this degradation. When on the third day her period starts, Daenerys suddenly finds herself walking *in*, rather than by, the stream – and feeling better for it, the mud soothing the blisters on her feet (Martin, *Dance* 1030). This is when she gets her sudden realisation:

> *In the stream or out of it, I must keep walking. Water flows downhill. The stream will take me to the river, and the river will take me home.*
> Except it wouldn't, not truly.
> Meereen was not her home, and never would be. (Dance 1030).

Despite what she has convinced herself to believe, her home is not in the slaver city of Meereen, but in Westeros. Her detour that has spanned over four books starts to come to an end when she starts to question her destination while following the stream.

Throughout the series, Daenerys has established herself as a mother figure, and though she goes through other stages of femininity – Maiden and Crone – the mother is a constant presence and an essential part of her identity. She is the Mother of Dragons, her three dragon children hatching in the funeral pyre of her husband, her son, and the witch who killed them both; also, the slaves whom she frees take to calling her "mother" in various languages (Martin, *Storm* 589). Gresham argues that "the role is not uniquely aligned with a stage of femininity but instead with one who nurtures, cares for, and protects a community, an ambivalent figure who promotes social regeneration" (Gresham 163): it is a role Daenerys takes on. Becoming a mother symbolically after her partner and biological child have died is an act of positive transgression and the route to Daenerys's power: she essentially declares herself a *khal* while suckling her three dragonlings, combining feminine, masculine, and bestial imagery (Gresham 151). Her difficulties arise when she neglects her responsibility as a mother, locking up her dragon children. Gresham argues that Daenerys's period "has returned to remind her of her status as a mother," representing the "maternal, generative strength that Dany has recently ignored" (166). When Daenerys re-establishes her self-image as a Targaryen by repeating the

words of her house, *Fire and Blood*, she also "reestablishes her relationship with her mythic aspect, with Drogon" (Gresham 164). She is thus able to forego the stages of the Triple Goddess archetype, retaining her Mother identity while leaving behind the expectations the world has placed on her.

Daenerys is ultimately a fluid character, shifting between the different states of the Triple Goddess archetype. Martin employs the Triple Goddess imagery in the state religion of the Seven Kingdoms: the Faith of the Seven maintains that Maiden, Mother and Crone make up three of the seven faces of god. Fairytale heroines often follow the Triple Goddess progression, "the image patterns and repeated symbolic motifs rely[ing] heavily on the white-red-black color progression" (Delaney et al. 162):

> Most heroines of tales are presented to us first in their white, or virgin, state. After they fulfill conditions of seclusion and trial and ride off with the prince, they are associated with the color red, or nubility; and all have a brush with transformation or death, which brings them in touch with the black. (Delaney et al. 166)

Daenerys embodies all these states, but in her case, they are often intermixed: Schubart argues that she "combines the start and the end of the fairy tale" (110). She ascends above societal expectations and a linear narrative of a woman's life by freely alternating between the states and even transcending them: as Gresham writes, "[a]t a young age, Dany has experienced all stages of femininity, and in her most empowered moments she represents the strongest qualities of both genders" (153), and her shifts back and forth between the phases of the Triple Goddess archetype have never been consistently female, but have included elements both male and bestial.

In *A Game of Thrones*, Daenerys's white hair, as well as her horse Silver, signify her virgin state, even if she is presented to the reader on the eve of her wedding, about to ride off with her *khal*. Her pregnancy culminates in the scene where she eats a raw stallion's heart in a ceremony before the crones of the *dosh khaleen*,[23] "[w]arm blood fill[ing] her mouth and [running] down over her chin" (Martin, *Game* 489). She has a brush with transformation and death when her hair burns off on her husband's funeral pyre in which her dragon children are born, but instead of just a Crone, this also makes her a Mother:

[23] Widows of dead *khals*.

> Only the birth of her dragons amidst the fire and smoke of Khal Drogo's funeral pyre had spared Dany herself from being dragged back to Vaes Dothrak to live out the reminder of her days amongst the crones of the *dosh khaleen.*
>
> *The fire burned away my hair, but elsewise it did not touch me.* (Martin, *Dance* 1021)

She consciously rejects death and decay and joining the *dosh khaleen*, instead choosing to become a mother even though she cannot conceive biologically: the imagery Martin uses when she walks into the pyre is "associated with birthing and nursing" (Goertz 113). The colour red and motherhood come into play again when she crosses the Red Waste with her dragons and a ragtag gang of followers, to the "Red City" of Astapor (Martin, *Dance* 352) where she frees her first slaves. Finally, the colour black enters her life with full force after Drogon has carried her to Dragonstone: not only is the dragon black, but her hair has burned and so has the landscape: "The air smelled of ash, every rock and tree in sight was scorched and blackened, the grown strewn with burned and broken bones" (Martin, *Dance* 1018). The change through which Daenerys is going, initially implying Cronehood, can also be seen in the waning crescent moon, [24] New Moon being a parallel to the menopause (Delaney et al. 236), and the seasons, as the long summer is slowly turning into winter: "Even here autumn made its presence felt, and winter would not be far behind" (Martin, *Dance* 1020). Should Daenerys continue to follow the stream back to Meereen, she might find her winter come. Instead she chooses to divert back to her original path. It is possible to read her shifts back and forth within the Triple Goddess progression as a sign of her uncertainty as to who she is due to having strayed too far from her path, and with her original purpose re-established, she is leaving behind the three stages of femininity and rising above them.

The final chapter is essentially a narrative of Daenerys's rebirth and transcendence over the Triple Goddess archetype. Daenerys's menstruation is a quintessential factor in her rebirth. It is first presented negatively, the narrative focusing on her ignorance and fear like many menarche narratives (Delaney et al. 173), which highlights the fact that her period is reappearing after several months' absence:

> For a moment she did not realize what it was. … *No. please, let me sleep some more. I'm so tired.* … Some of the stalks felt wet. Had it rained again? She sat up, afraid

[24] This is not specified in the text, but only a waning crescent is visible early in the morning ("Waning Crescent Moon") which is when Daenerys sees it (Martin, *Dance* 1029).

> that she had soiled herself as she slept. When she brought her fingers to her face, she could smell the blood on them. *Am I dying?* Then she saw the pale crescent moon, floating high above the grass, and it came to her that this was no more than her moon blood. (Martin, *Dance* 1029)

Her menstruation mixes elements of both Maiden, Mother and Crone, signifying the change that she is undergoing. Even though it is first presented to the reader in what is essentially a menarche narrative, she does not dwell on the menarcheal girl's fear, but rises above it. There is also motherhood and fertility: Gresham speculates that her menstruation may signal the return of her reproductive powers and adds that it is "a promising sign, if not for another child then for her own rebirth and renewal as queen" (166). However, the fact that she does not remember how many months ago she last bled can also be read as a sign of menopause.

In how Daenerys reacts to her menstruation, we see her process of finding herself. Her first impulse is to try to clean away the blood using what she has at hand: "She rubbed her fingers through the dirt, and grabbed a handful of grass to wipe between her legs" (Martin, *Dance* 1029). Even though she is alone in the wilderness, social norms make her prioritise cleanliness without thinking, and it is noteworthy that menstrual blood elicits a different response in her than the vomit and diarrhoea in which she is most likely also covered, implying that it is worse than faeces. Discussing vomit and defecation in her grotesque realist reading of Daenerys, Gresham suggests that "physical debasement, or lowering, is directly tied to mental enlightenment:" like the open sores on her feet, they are not "signs of death and disease but symbols of movement and development" (165). When it starts, her menstruation also fits in this category. As she moves on and starts remembering her purpose, and the ghosts of her memory finally prompt her to connect again to the words of her house – *Fire and Blood* – so does her shame disappear. By saying the words out loud she has re-established her connection both to her body and her dragons: after saying the words, she no longer hallucinates, and after days of ignoring her Drogon finally comes to her call and lets her ride him:

> Dany leapt onto his back. She stank of blood and sweat and fear, but none of that mattered. "To go forward I must go back," she said. Her bare legs tightened around the dragon's neck. She kicked him, and Drogon threw himself into the sky. (Martin, *Dance* 1032-33).

Her appearance has never been farther from queenly, but the dragon obeys her willingly because he recognises his mother again. During her isolation, Daenerys has

undergone a transformation – and it is now, when she leaps onto Drogon's back, her menstrual blood flowing on his scales, that she finally leaves the stream that she has been following for days and ascends above the trivial concerns of ruling Meereen and being a woman.

In the end, Daenerys comes to self-discovery and transcends shame, freeing herself from the expectations of the patriarchal society. Her storyline so far culminates in a striking scene: alone in the grasslands but for her dragon, bald and dirty, dressed in tattered rags, and covered in menstrual blood and other bodily fluids, she is discovered by the men of Khal Jhaqo, one-time lieutenant – or bloodrider, as they were called – to her late husband Khal Drogo. There is anything but shame in how she carries herself: indeed, nothing in the text implies that she is even conscious of how she looks or of the blood on her legs. Given that throughout history, both in the real world and in Westeros, menstruation has been a source of shame, and hiding it has been "an issue of personal, social, and moral hygiene" (Newton 20), this is a remarkable act of rebellion. Newton writes that "[a] woman manages her menstruation both on behalf of herself and on behalf of others, so that others do not see her pollution" (167), and even though Daenerys first tried to wipe away the blood, she has by now given up and let go of the social expectations of a patriarchal society. By doing so, she has transcended and moved past the point of shame in a way Cersei Lannister could only dream of doing. Standing beside her dragon and bleeding freely, not staining anything but letting her blood fertilise the soil, she is finally taking what is hers with fire and blood. As Gresham puts it, in this liminal state that embraces and combines feminine, masculine and bestial imagery, Martin presents Daenerys as "the embodiment of all life" and "showcases her potential to win the throne and become an ideal leader of the people" (151).

With Daenerys's own empowerment, the portrayal of her menstruation shifts its focus from her initial ignorance and fear into something positive: Gresham argues that Martin persistently empowers Daenerys by "employing traditionally negative narrative materials for positive purposes and allowing his heroine to challenge and redefine order" (152). She is standing in front of fifty men with blood on her thighs and clothes in a revolutionary act of transgression, more than refusing – in that it does not even occur to her – to feel shame for her body. Despite being considered a pollutant, menstruation has also been seen as a symbol of women's creative and destructive power (Newton 20), and this is what Daenerys is ultimately embracing

here. By menstruating without shame in front of a group of male warriors she is crossing the cultural imperative of keeping menstruation hidden, specifically from men (Rosewarne 8). At this moment, she is the embodiment of the words of her house: *Fire and Blood*; and Khal Jhaqo and his fifty riders are categorically unable to harm her.

5 Conclusion

Representations of menstruation are getting increasingly common in high fantasy fiction and are no longer discussed in strictly negative terms: menstruation can be a regular non-event, or even empowering. Still, menstruation is by no means a part of a female character's everyday life. Not nearly every female character menstruates, and even those who do often get their period only once, even when later menstruation might be relevant for the plot, like in the case of Celaena's tournament performance in Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass*. Because literature reinforces ideas of what is normal (Evins 2), the representations of menstruation within fantasy fiction are significant, contributing to how readers see women.

The absence of menstruation reinforces the idea that like the male experience, male-coded heroines are valued more highly in fantasy fiction. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, tomboys such as Arya and Brienne do not menstruate. Menstrual management often comes up when a female character needs to impersonate a man: simply avoiding leakage does not seem to be enough of a reason to address it. By leaving out menstruation, fantasy fiction idealises and thus sanitises the female body: for it to sate the male gaze, it is denied its basic reproductive functions. As Milon points out, "[b]y subscribing to male-heroic narratives, women describe themselves in a language of their oppression" (52), and by accepting heroines who do not menstruate as the norm, we perpetuate the stigma against menstruation. The view that an ideal female body does not bleed appropriates women's experience. Besides idealisation, female bodies are presented as more natural in line with the Euro-American mind-body dichotomy, as seen for example in the manifestation of magical skills during menstruation in David and Leigh Eddings's *Polgara the Sorceress*, or in Elliania's speech of the goddess Eda making women complete in *Fool's Fate* by Robin Hobb. The emphasis on women's corporeality while idealising their bodies – menstruation

is not mentioned again in either book – shows the double standard in which fantasy fiction treats women.

The elision and negative representations of menstruation also contribute to a reading of fantasy as an escapist genre. Reflecting contemporary notions about what history must have been like, fantasy fiction is often set in misogynistic societies (Milon 39) where the default gender for heroism is male (Le Guin, *Earthsea* 5). While many women may not mind identifying with female characters who do not menstruate, it seems that the escapism provided by the elision of menstruation – and, subsequently, the representation of women as sexually appealing – is targeted more at the male reader. Moreover, even when women readers are given a respite of menstruation, they may still face prejudices and harassment that focus on it: even though Brienne of Tarth never menstruates in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, men often put her perceived aggression down to her moon's blood.

Attitudes towards menstruation in fantasy fiction are most easily charted by analysing terminology: societies which seem to adhere to a stigmatic view of menstruation have more limited vocabulary for it (such as Throne of Glass and "fertility cycle"), and vice versa (such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* and "moon blood," "red flower" etc.). The absence of contemporary terms makes it easier to discuss menstruation inconspicuously, creating an effect of menstrual distancing which allows the reader to entertain the idea that menstruation is a neutral bodily function. Yet even when fantasy fiction is thus circumspect, the expressions for menstruation often have a medical ring to them, implying that menstruation is first and foremost a health issue.

Menarche narratives are one of the most common representations of menstruation in fantasy fiction, but interestingly, they also seem to be the most negative, as fantasy focuses on presenting menarche as a disgusting disruption of life rather than as a rite of passage (Rosewarne 3). With some exceptions (such as Elliania in *Fool's Fate*), the arrival of menarche is presented as a negative experience, the narrative lingering on the young girl's emotional turmoil. While in *Alanna: The First Adventure* the protagonist calms down after talking to the healing woman, Polgara in *Polgara the Sorceress* and Sansa in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are left to their own devices, the scene breaking off before they have come to terms with their new menstrual reality. These representations which emphasise fear and shame place fantasy fiction staunchly within the patriarchal framework: they perpetuate the

notion that there is something wrong with bodies that bleed and that the appropriate reaction to menstruation is horror. There are echoes of this in narratives that portray bleeding in connection to a woman's first penetrative intercourse: they also focus on her pain, relishing the sight of blood which is more acceptable to show even though it is vaginal bleeding all the same because it has been shed by a man. By problematising and even demonising menstruation – focalising the negative emotions through either the adolescent girl or the reactions of (male) characters around her – writers exert their power to objectify women.

Whereas menarche narratives mostly follow the same routine, menstruation narratives connected to fertility and sexuality are more varied, and often more matter-of-factly. When menstruation is presented (as absent) in connection to sexuality (Rosewarne 3), it seems to be more acceptable in fantasy fiction. This is interesting given that female-coded heroines are generally valued less highly and pregnancy and its effects are rarely described: fantasy does not prioritise the female experience or motherhood. However, it may be for exactly this reason that fertility-related representations are more neutral: they are often connected to contraception, allowing women (such as Althea in *The Liveship Traders* and Alanna in *Alanna: The First Adventure*) to lead male-coded lives of casual, risk-free sex. Because female characters' availability for sex is important, mentioning her menstruation is acceptable.

Surprisingly, superstitions presenting menstruation as disgusting (Rosewarne 3) are less frequent in fantasy fiction than one might expect given their prevalence in the real world. When Robin Hobb brings up prejudices related to menstrual blood in *The Liveship Traders*, she turns them upside down by showing them for what they are: superstitions. Menstruation can even appear empowering (Rosewarne 3) when superstitions against it protect a protagonist from rape (*The Liveship Traders*) or its emergence coincides with the manifestation of a magical ability (*Polgara the Sorceress*), although these are somewhat double-edged swords because the potential empowerment must be found by way of interpretation in what can also be read as a negative representation of menstruation. Besides superstitions, fantasy fiction also contains sexist harassment which targets menstruation (such as the harassment Brienne faces in *A Song of Ice and Fire*), although again, this seems to be rarer than in real-life narratives. There are very few instances of menstrual sex per se, probably partly thanks to the stigma surrounding it, and even when it does appear, its

implications are different for women and men – while Jaime's actions in *A Song of Ice and Fire* normalise it and show it as a sign of true passion, Cersei's participation in it reinforces her image as a transgressive and indulgent character.

Menstrual management also seems to be an accepted topic for discussion, although it is only addressed when a character starts her period (Alanna in *Alanna: The First Adventure*) or wants to pass as a man (Althea in *The Liveship Traders*). The prevalence of cross-dressing heroines who take extra care to manage their menstruation is interesting because one would expect that a woman cares about keeping her menstruation hidden even when being caught menstruating would not risk her performance. Given the focus on cross-dressers' menstrual management, it is also interesting that female characters whose appearance and behaviour tend towards the masculine (such as Brienne and Arya in *A Song of Ice and Fire*) do not have their menstruation addressed at all, as if the condition to hide one's period to pass as a man successfully did not apply to them. By allowing for non-menstruating tomboys, writers blur the line between male-coded heroines and male heroes, but allowing tomboys not to bleed also implies that physical femininity is limited to feminine appearances.

The elision of menstruation, while contributing to the escapist quality of fantasy as a genre, probably has more to do with contemporary than strictly narrative views towards menstruation. However, its representations reflect attitudes towards women in various fantasy worlds, as well as the implicit hierarchy between male and female-coded heroines. Menstruation can also be a tool for highlighting specific character traits and thus guiding reader sympathies: in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Sansa, Cersei, and Daenerys's periods are portrayed very differently, and the representations direct the reader to interpret the characters as respectively naïve, indulgent, and empowered. Nonetheless, empowering representations are still scarce in fantasy fiction, and the attitudes that come across from the narrative are usually neutral at best. Compared to fantasy written in the 20th century, more recent narratives have been successful in broadening the field of menstruation representations, but this does not always mean positive representations. When menstruation is mainly used in a context of fear, shame, and transgression, it feeds the stigma against it and continues to imply that there is something wrong with being a woman.

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